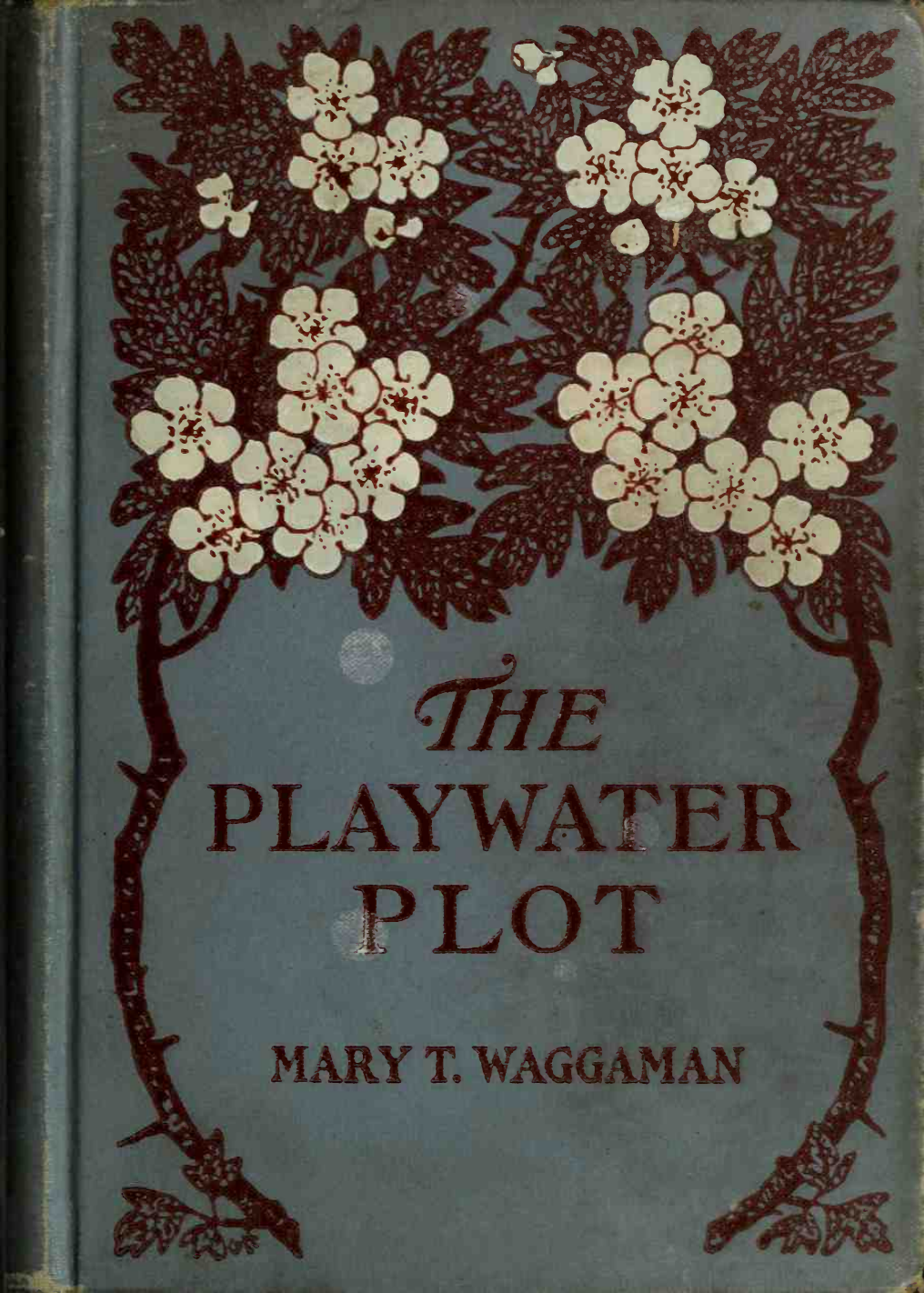

THE PLAYWATER PLOT

MARY T. WAGGAMAN

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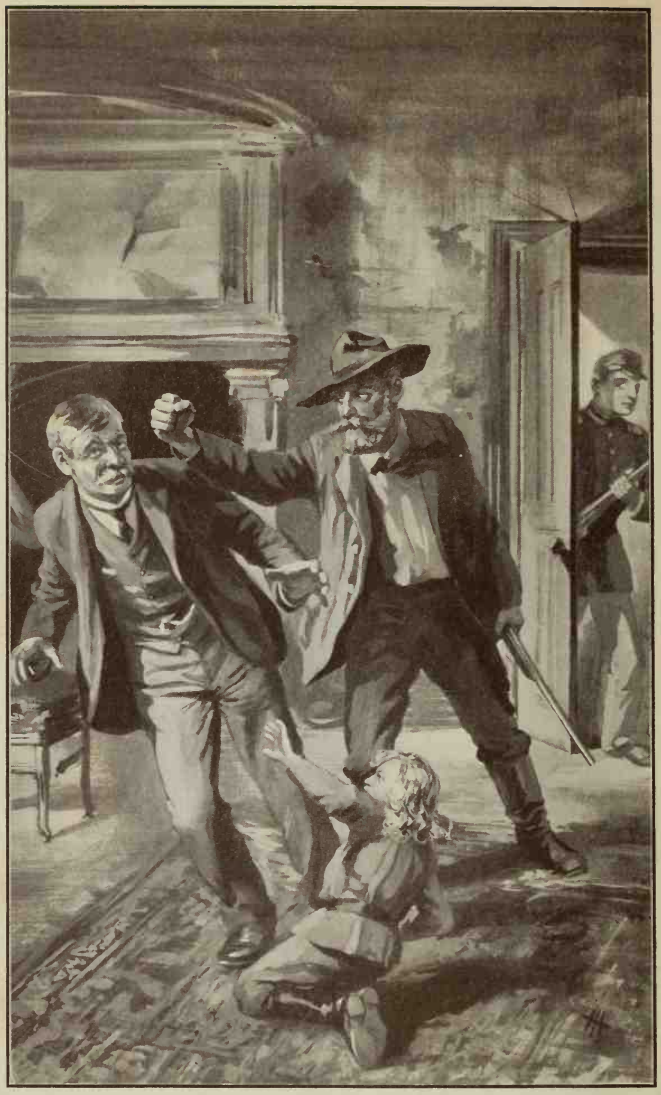

"In a moment the Colonel went sprawling to the floor under a mighty blow from old Seth's knotty fist."—Page 182.

THE

PLAYWATER PLOT.

BY

MARY T. WAGGAMAN,

Author of "Tom's Luck Pot," "Nan Nobody," etc.

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THE PLAYWATER PLOT.

CHAPTER I.

DOCTOR DICK.

"HOLD her head back, Ted. Steady with that foot, Pat, while I put on the splint."

"Oh, you are hurting her, Dick."

"No, I am not; or if I am, this leg has to be set, hurt or no hurt. Stop crying, Pat. A nice sort of doctor's nurse you would make!"

"Oh, kitty, my poor kitty! Oh, couldn't you give her chloroform, Dick?"

"No, I couldn't," was the sternly professional reply. "And if I could I wouldn't, Pat; she is too young."

It was a delicate surgical operation that was being performed at the corner of the old stone fence, this June morning. The surgeon,

with his torn hat thrust back on his curly head, was skilfully at work; while his brother, aged twelve, held the rebellious patient, and a pretty, fair-haired little girl looked tearfully on.

So absorbed were all three in the momentous business that they did not hear the approach of wheels on the grass-grown lane, and the occupant of a roomy, shabby old buggy drew up his horse, and sat surveying the group unobserved, a half-amused, half-tender smile lighting his rugged face. "Hallo!" he cried at last. "You have a patient, I see, this morning, Doctor Dick. Any professional assistance needed?"

"Oh, good morning, Doctor Deane," said the young operator in a relieved tone. "I wish you would look at her and see. It's Pat's white kitten, who put her leg into a rat-trap last night."

"And she is nearly killed," sobbed Pat.

"Not a bit of it," said Doctor Deane, surveying the squirming, mewing patient. "I could not have bound up a leg better myself; in fact I don't know that I could have done it quite as well."

"Oh, but she will be lame all her life—my poor, pretty kitty!" wailed Pat inconsolably.

"Lame?" repeated the Doctor, with a twinkle in his eye. "What sort of surgeons do you take us for, Miss Pat? Lame? No indeed. Keep her quiet, if you can, for a day or two, and she will be as lively a kitten as ever jumped at a canary. If she isn't, well, I think there are six spick-span new ones just opening their eyes in my stable-loft, and you can have them all."

"I don't want them," was the doleful reply to this liberal offer. "I don't want any kitten but my own dear little Fluff. Give her to me, Dick. Oh, she is trembling all over, and no wonder. I will hold her all day in my arms, and if—if she is lame, I'll love her just the same, and more."

And Pat cuddled her downy darling close to her loyal little woman heart.

"I was just driving out to your place, Dick; but as it is half a mile off my road this morning and I am in a hurry, you can take a message to Aunt Beth for me. Tell her I say Mrs. Leonard has decided to come out with her boy, so they will be at Playwater to-morrow

evening, about six. And between us, Dick," added the speaker, nodding, "if we don't get that young chap up on his legs, we are not the doctors we ought to be."

"What is the matter with him?" asked Dick with professional interest.

"No one seems able to say," answered the old doctor; "so that is for clever fellows like you and me to find out. From all I can learn, he was born rich and rickety—an unlucky combination, Dick."

"Rickety means soft-boned, doesn't it?" asked Dick.

"Well, sometimes," answered the old doctor grimly, "and sometimes it only means soft-brained, Dick. But in either case I have an idea Playwater is the place for him. So he is coming to-morrow. My compliments to Miss Beth, and tell her she may get things ready for her boarders. Good-by, boys, and Miss Patty, remember, in case you want to increase your family cares, there are six gray kittens in my stable-loft ready for adoption."

"I don't want them," said Patty, contentedly stroking Fluff's nose; "I don't want any kitty but my own, even if her leg is lame. I'll

keep her on a cushion all day, and feed her on cream, and catch mice for her in a trap—my own dear, pretty Fluffy!"

"Another case of soft bones for us, Dick," laughed the doctor. "Between Mrs. Leonard and Miss Pat, we are likely to have our hands full. But kittens won't stand it when boys must. To-morrow evening at six, remember, look out for us." And nodding pleasantly again to the trio, the old doctor drove off, his buggy jolting and swinging over the grass-grown ruts of the dim shaded lane.

"It will be a nice little plum in Miss Wade's pocket in any case," the good doctor soliloquized, "and money is sadly needed at Playwater, as any one with half an eye can see. The good aunts are doing their best for poor Dick Wade's youngsters, but it is going to be a hard pull to give them the chance they ought to have. George! how that boy brought his father back to me this morning!" There was just the same steady, resolute light in his blue eyes that shone in poor old Dick's when he bent over a patient. What a surgeon that man would have made if he had only lived ten years longer! And that youngster has it

in him too, I can see. It would be a burning shame to have him spend his life planting corn and potatoes. Why haven't I a few thousands to spend in the education of a boy like that?" continued the good doctor in stern self-arraignment.

And the summer breeze might have whispered in reply, Because most of the good doctor's bills were only paid in prayers and blessings from grateful hearts that cannot be counted in earthly numerals.

Meantime there was eager discussion beside the rose-wreathed stone fence.

"Who is coming to Playwater, Dick?" asked Pat.

"What is he coming for?" queried Ted rather indignantly.

"It's—it's—boarders," answered Dick, gulping a little over the unwelcome word. "I heard Aunt Beth and Aunt Leigh talking about it. You see, we're pretty poor, and the porch is beginning to break down, and the kitchen roof leaks, and there are no ploughs or harrows to work the farm. People have been telling Aunt Beth that with a spring like ours, and such butter and cream, she ought to

fill the house with summer boarders; but Aunt Leigh said she'd starve first. So we couldn't think of it until the other day, when Doctor Deane came out with a fine lady who has a sick little boy, and they talked to Aunt Beth and Aunt Leigh for a long time; and when they went away Aunt Leigh cried, and said she supposed that she would have to give in, though she knew that it would make every Wade in the old burying-ground rise from his grave to have Playwater turned into a tavern. So that is what Doctor Deane means," concluded Dick. "The boarders are coming, and we must hurry home to tell Aunt Beth."

And the trio hurried off over the broad untilled fields, nodding with daisies and fringed with thickets of wild roses, until they came in sight of a wide-winged old house, shabby and weather-beaten despite the sheltering oaks that had stretched their protecting boughs above it for fully a hundred years. A rough carriage-road wound its way up the steep hill to the stone-pillared gate, but the children had taken a shorter path that clambered through brier and tangle, up the rocks wet with the spray of a little streamlet that came leaping

in a succession of miniature cascades down the bank. It was the merriest and maddest of little streams, tumbling over the rocks as if wild with glee, while a few yards beyond were another, and still another, all dancing and foaming and filling the air with blithe, rippling music, as they frolicked off to the green valley below. Little Patty, with Fluff purring contentedly on her breast, stopped in breathless delight.

"Oh, Dick! Why—why—the waters are all playing to-day."

"Yes," answered Dick, "they have all broken out together. It's the first time for years. Generally there is only one wide awake; the other two just trickle sleepily. But this year all our springs are full head. Uncle Pete says it means some sort of luck, but whether it is good or bad he can't say."

"Oh, it is good, I am sure," chirped Pat. "The waters wouldn't play for bad luck, Dick. Just listen to them. I never heard them make such music before."

"Nor I," answered Dick. "And old Sweet, that has been almost dry for five years, is ahead of them all, bubbling to the brim.

Such a fuss as they all keep up at night when everything is quiet! Aunt Leigh says it makes her so nervous she can't sleep. But I like it; don't you, Ted?"

Ted, who was a round, rosy echo of his older brother, nodded affirmatively.

"Oh, I like it too," said Pat eagerly. "I just love it. Let us sit down and listen to them awhile, Dick, before we go up to the house. Oh, I am afraid mamma won't let me come over to Playwater so often now if you are going to have boarders. Oh, I wish I had been born a boy, like you, Dick. It's awful dull to be a girl."

"Don't bother about that, Pat," said Dick cheerily. "We'll look out for you—won't we, Ted?—and give you just as much fun as we have. You can put on your old sailor suit and run as wild as you please over here. But come on to the house now, for we must give Doctor Deane's message to Aunt Beth." And the three scrambled on up the rocks, amid the spray and splash of the leaping waters, until they reached the top of the hill, where the old house stood in a sweet, wild tangle of vines and rose-bushes, its Playing Waters, as hundreds

of years ago the Indians had called the triple spring, bubbling up amid the broken arches that once had prisoned them, and dancing off in joyous freedom on their own wild way. More than two hundred years ago Dick's sturdy ancestor, Laurence Wade, with greater wisdom than many of his contemporaries, had pressed back into the wilderness a couple of miles, to avoid the miasma that rose from the river shore. In his search for a healthful home to which to bring his fair young English wife, he had found a few old Indians, too feeble to follow the march of their tribe, lingering around these forest springs. Wonderful were the legends they told of the healing, life-giving waters; and, charmed with the beauty of the site, the young man had purchased the ground and built the old mansion that was to be the home of his race for generations. He was rich, hospitable, generous, and soon the wilderness bloomed into order and beauty around; the "Playing Waters" of the Indians rose in sparkling jets from carved granite basins; the great house was thronged with guests through all the glad summer, and often until the forests blazed under the first touch of the frost.

But as the years went by this smiling fortune changed. Loss followed loss; war, poverty, sorrow, death darkened the happy homestead. Its last master, Doctor Richard Wade, a young physician whose brilliant opening career in a neighboring city had promised a future of name and fame, had died at thirty, leaving his young wife and her baby boys penniless, save for their share in the old mountain home, where his two maiden sisters still lived, drawing from the half-tilled fields and failing orchards the meagre income necessary for their simple wants.

So hither the broken-hearted young widow had come, only to lay down the weary burden of her crushed life within a short year, and leave three-year-old Dick and Baby Ted to the care of the two old aunts, who had served and slaved and stinted for them ever since, while the great house grew shabbier, and the fields wilder, and the playing waters broke rebelliously from their crumbling bounds and danced away down the hill.

Thus things stood on this bright June day, when, taking a short cut through the cabbage-patch, Doctor Deane's young messengers burst unceremoniously into the wide, spotless kitchen,

where a plump, comfortable, little old lady sat capping strawberries.

"They are coming, Aunt Beth. Doctor Deane says get the rooms ready. The boarders will be here to-morrow evening at six."

CHAPTER II.

PLAYWATER FARM.

"God bless me!" twittered Aunt Beth, nearly dropping a pan brimming with ripe red berries. "What a start you gave me, boys!" Aunt Beth was round and rosy as a winter apple, with soft white hair, that would ripple in spite of all her efforts to smooth it prim and straight, and eyes bright as those of the robin chirping amid the snow.

It was a dark, cold day indeed when Aunt Beth could not chirp and twitter and find a cheery side to things with those bright old bird eyes that neither tears nor time had been able to dim. She wore a plain gingham dress, a trifle short in the skirt, and with no nonsense or furbelows about it. But the whitest of soft handkerchiefs was pinned about her still pretty throat, and her apron was always like the driven snow.

And the work those plump little hands of Aunt Beth's could do. They were old-fashioned hands, it is true; soft and white and pink-tipped as they were, they had never known the touch of a modern manicure. They could not run a typewriter or an electric carpet-sweeper or a clothes-wringer; indeed, though it was rather a matter of shame to Aunt Beth, they had never been able to master the mysteries of the handsome sewing-machine which her brother had sent her some twenty years before, and which had served chiefly as an ornamental cabinet for the parlor ever since. But what machine could tuck and fell and gather and stroke better than Aunt Beth's fairy fingers? What patent carpet-sweeper could leave a room so spotless and dainty? What Chinese laundry could produce such laces and ruffles as old Chloe, working under Aunt Beth's eyes, sent up every week to be packed away in great presses fragrant with dried roses and lavender?

The roof might leak and the porch totter, but not a spider dared swing a web in the old house from garret to cellar, not a shadow dimmed the cracked window-panes, not a

speck of dust marred the shining polish of the old mahogany furniture. And such rugs as Aunt Beth could weave, such lace as she could knit, such bread and butter, and pickles and preserves, and pie and cake as she could make, such peach cordial and blackberry wine and raspberry vinegar and elder-flower water as she could brew! Ah, there was no end to the accomplishments of the dear, plump, little old lady who turned her bright eyes on Dick and Ted this morning and repeated: "The boarders! Bless us, and not a thing ready for them! Leigh, dear"—to a tall, slender old lady who just then swept slowly in from the dining-room—"Doctor Deane says Mrs. Leonard and her boy are coming to-morrow evening."

Aunt Leigh sank into the kitchen rocker with a sigh. She was a very stately old lady indeed, with white buckle curls, on each side of her delicate, handsome face, which had still the faint bloom of a faded rose. She wore an old-fashioned lavender muslin, with frills of lace about the neck and wrists, and a little lace cap in her snowy curls. For Aunt Leigh could not forget that forty years ago she had been the belle of the county, and still clung pa-

thetically to the shadow of that long-lost crown.

"It is hard on you, I know, dear," said Aunt Beth sympathetically. "But really, you know, the roof will be down in another year if something is not done, and Uncle Pete can scarcely totter after the plough now."

"I never thought I would live to see our father's house turned into a tavern. But don't consider my feelings, Beth," said Aunt Leigh drearily. "I suppose I will have to give up my own room and go up into the attic."

"Indeed you won't," said her sister quickly. "Climbing stairs with that weak heart of yours! You will keep your own room, Leigh, and not be bothered by anything or anybody. The boys and I can run the house, boarders and all; can't we, Dick? And we'll begin at once, with Pat to help us. Take a pick at the strawberries first before I put them into the preserving-kettle. I have not seen them so fine for years, Leigh. We can make all the jam and wine we want, and have strawberry shortcake every day besides. And now we will put up the clean muslin curtains, and polish the old silver, and bring out mother's china,

for we have nothing else. For one hundred dollars a month we must give our best."

It was quite impossible to resist blithe, busy Aunt Beth, and soon Fluff was deposited in the stocking-basket, and Pat was crimping pillow-case ruffles, and Dick tacking up curtains, and Ted polishing andirons, while Aunt Leigh dolefully darned the table-linen treasured unused for years, and moaned over the quaint old china and glass and silver brought out from locked closets.

For Aunt Beth had her way, as the sunshine always does; and the busy note of preparation went on gleefully until all was ready, and the shabby old house shone from roof to ground with cleanliness and comfort and simple cheer.

Every polished window-pane was flashing back the sunset fire merrily next evening, when a comfortable travelling-carriage turned the bend of the turnpike, and a pale-faced boy, half buried in rugs and cushions, looked out upon the beautiful picture stretching before him: the hill, the valley, the dancing waters, the old ivy-veiled home under the sheltering oaks.

"Is that the place, mamma?" he asked of a fair, anxious lady beside him.

"Yes, dear. Don't lean forward; the road is so rough, Lester, you might strain your back. I think we had better close the window, doctor; there is a chill in this mountain air."

"The air is what we are up here for, madam," answered Doctor Deane, who sat opposite the newcomers. "If you are going to shut it out, we may as well keep this young man in town. This is Mother Nature's own sanitarium, as I told you, and we can't temper it with steam heat."

"What a queer-looking old place!" said the boy, staring around him. "No fountains or drives or music or anything. Why, mamma, it isn't like the places we go to at all."

"No, dear, it isn't," answered his mother anxiously; "but we have tried so many fashionable baths and springs, and they were not good for you; and you said you hated them so."

"I do," the boy answered with tremulous earnestness. "I have been bathed and douched and rubbed and dosed until I never want to see any springs again. And it is just as bad at the seaside, with salt-baths and massage, and

nothing to do but roll around in a sick-chair up and down the sands. And at the Adirondacks, though I had a pony carriage, I got so tired."

"Poor darling!" murmured his mother pitifully. "It's only natural, you know, in his state, doctor."

"Very natural indeed, madam," answered the doctor dryly.

"I am sure I have tried everything," continued the lady plaintively, while Lester lay back wearily among his cushions, his momentary interest gone. "Let me shade your eyes with my parasol, dear; this sunlight is too strong for you. We were going to Carlsbad this summer, as I told you, doctor; but my dear mother is so feeble that I may be called to her bedside at any moment, so I could not go so far from home. There are the pretty waterfalls I told you about, Lester; don't you want to look out at them?"

"I don't like waterfalls," answered Lester wearily. "They make my head ache."

"My poor angel!" was the pitiful murmur. "This rough ride has been too much for him, doctor, as I feared. Close your eyes, dear, and

as soon as we get to the house you shall go to bed and take one of your nice powders to put you to sleep."

"He takes sleeping-powders, does he?" asked the old doctor grimly.

"Always," answered the lady, "after any excitement; his nerves are so delicate, you see, doctor."

"Yes, I see," answered the old gentleman, surveying the white, listless face before him with a quiet twinkle in his eye. "But the ordinary sleeping-powder won't do here, madam. In fact it would be positively debilitating. Too much oxygen in the atmosphere. But if you will throw yours away, I have my medicine-chest with me and will mix you a powder more suitable to this mountain air."

"Oh, thank you, doctor, I wish you would," said the lady eagerly. "I really never thought of the change of air. And there are his nervines and tonics; they may be unsuitable, too, in this atmosphere."

"Most likely," said the doctor. "In fact I would advise great caution in the use of all medicine for the present. We are fifteen hundred feet above the sea, and the action of the

heart is quickened by the altitude, as you know, madam."

"Oh, I see, I see. I won't dare to give him a drop of anything without your advice, doctor. We must be very careful, for the dear boy's heart is by no means strong."

"Are we almost there? I am so tired," said Lester feebly.

And we fear the stout old doctor muttered a "swear-word" under his breath as he saw Lester's head, with its fair girlish curls, sink wearily on his mother's shoulder, and his waxen lids close over the dull blue eyes; for the wise old physician recognized that this was a case where woman's foolish tenderness would baffle all his skill.

Two months before, Judge Martin, his old friend and Lester's guardian, had consulted him confidentially in regard to his young ward. "My business is only with the boy's money," he had said bluntly. "His mother is his natural guardian in all other things. But between her and her doctors the boy is likely to have the little life that is in him physicked away. His father died young, and Lester was born puny and delicate, and heir to a couple of mill-

ions. God bless me, sir, I don't think the chap has ever drawn a natural breath. They had him in a patent baby incubator, or something of the sort, before he was two hours old. And it has been nothing but cures and specialists of all kinds ever since. We have tried everything but sturdy old-fashioned common-sense; and that being your specialty I've come to you. Mrs. Leonard is looking for a place in the country, and if you can coax her up somewhere near you, and take the boy in hand for a few months—well, if you were any one else, I would say charge what you please; but I know that does not count with you. But if you can make any sort of a live boy out of that poor young money bags, he shall build a hospital for you, Deane."

"Take care," said the old doctor, with a nod of his grizzled head, "I may hold you to that bargain, Martin. I don't pretend to be a miracle-worker, but if you can get the boy out of the hands of the experts and up near Playwater Springs, I'll do what I can, and let old-fashioned Mother Nature do the rest."

But the doctor's confidence in himself and Mother Nature almost failed this evening as he

looked at the pale, listless face of his young patient, all unstirred and uninterested by the beauty of the scene around him: the soft green of the shadowy valley, the forest vistas blazing with the sunset, the leap of the laughing waters from the oak-crowned hill.

Sylvan scenes were no novelty to Lester; he had been carried from one paradise of bloom and beauty to another ever since he had been born. Even his city home had its park and fountain, its terrace and rose-bowers, which Mother Nature would find it hard to excel. He had a lake with swans and boats all his own. He had lived in summer palaces, where the gardens glowed with rare blossoms, and the air throbbed with music and flashed with electric lights. He had floated over summer seas in great white-winged yachts that bore him and his mother where they willed. His life had been like a fairy dream; for his puny hand held the wizard wand of gold.

It was little wonder, then, that he lay back pale and listless in the carriage, unheeding the tender beauty of the sunset, the splendor of the western sky, when the gates of heaven seemed swinging open under canopies of

purple and rose, the pale star shining like a silver lamp on the closing portals of the day, the kiss of the mountain breeze, the twitter of the sleepy birds, the laugh of the "Playing Waters" leaping down the hill.

"My poor darling! The journey has exhausted him," murmured Mrs. Leonard, holding her jewelled vinaigrette to the darling's nose, while the doctor looked on in grim silence, and at funeral pace the heavy carriage rolled along the terraced road that wound up to Playwater gate. And then—then suddenly the solemn stillness was broken by a wild tumult of shout and shriek and rushing water, a storm of spray whitened the hillside, and old Sweet, swollen into a foaming torrent, leaped upon the passing carriage, drenching its startled occupants from head to foot.

"Thunderation!" spluttered the doctor, springing to his feet.

"My boy, my boy!" shrieked Mrs. Leonard, as Lester, gasping and shuddering, started from her arms.

"You young scoundrels!" roared the doctor wrathfully, when, the carriage rolling out of

the sweeping waters, he caught sight of two excited little figures wildly gesticulating on the rocks above. "What sort of a trick is this?"

"It is no trick at all. Gee whiz! we are sorry, doctor," said Dick as he and Ted, breathless and wide-eyed, reached the road. "We had dammed up old Sweet to fill the water-tank, when—when he broke loose like this."

"You have killed my boy, you little wretches," sobbed Mrs. Leonard passionately.

But the fairy prince, drenched, shivering, gasping as he was, rose to the occasion nobly.

"No, they haven't, mamma; indeed they haven't," and the dull blue eyes lighted with boyish sympathy as they fell on the two ragged, rueful young sinners beside the road. "I'm not hurt a bit, mamma. Gee! wasn't it a douche, though!" and Lester laughed a faint, low, little laugh. "It was the jolliest bath I ever had."

"Ah!" said the doctor to himself, catching his breath after his ducking, with a grim smile, "that sounds promising. There may be hope for my young man yet."

CHAPTER III.

OLD ST. BRIDE'S.

GREAT was the consternation of the gentle old ladies at Playwater Hall when their guests arrived drenched and shivering from old Sweet's rough welcome. Mrs. Leonard was hysterically helpless with alarm, but Aunt Beth soon had a log fire burning and snapping on the big hearth in Lester's dimity-draped chamber, and the boy rubbed and warmed until his pale cheeks glowed. Then, when he was safely tucked away in the great four-poster, with its downy pillows and sheets fragrant with dried roses and lavender, the good lady proceeded to coax and coddle and soothe the nervous mother.

"It won't hurt him a bit, madam, not a bit," said Doctor Deane cheerily, coming to Aunt Beth's assistance. "There's a great deal to be said for hydropathy, you know, though I

wouldn't advise in general such practice as Doctor Dick's. You see the youngsters had been at work all day damming the spring, so as to save this fine water for use in the house. But old Sweet, it seems, refused to be dammed and broke loose. Give the boy this," and the doctor handed Mrs. Leonard some carefully folded papers which he had just filled with powdered sugar from Miss Beth's pantry. "One every hour until he goes to sleep, madam, and in the morning I will call again."

But before the doctor had finished the cup of tea which Aunt Leigh insisted on pouring for him on the vine-wreathed porch, Lester was sleeping softly as a healthy babe.

"Looks as if old Sweet had hit the case right," the old gentleman laughed to himself as he drove off through the gathering twilight. "I've no doubt that was the first healthy shock the boy has had in his coddled life. George! I begin to have some hopes of him. I thought this evening that they had softened him, bones and brains, beyond cure. But I really believe there's a chance for him yet."

And indeed when Doctor Deane drove over next morning he found Lester none the worse

for his ducking, but seated in Aunt Beth's rocking-chair on the shaded porch and taking an unusual interest in the unpacking of the big wagons that had brought his belongings from the depot. A motley show they made of all that gold could buy to ease the pain and cheer the weary hours of this poor little enchanted prince. Bath and bed and swing and easy-chair, toys and games and books of every kind; while a basket phaeton and Shetland pony completed the display that made Dick and Ted stare in silent wonder, as Victor and Fifine—the French "man" and "maid"—moved deftly around, unpacking, arranging, and generally taking possession of the establishment. They seemed oddly out of place in the wide, shabby old house—Fifine with her lace cap and apron and fluttering ribbons, and Victor with his sloe-black eyes and shining hair and dapper dress.

Doctor Deane's keen glance rested on them disapprovingly.

"A nice pair of monkeys," he growled, as, after a few cheery words to his patient, he strolled off with Dick down the box-bordered path. "Aunt Beth will have her hands full

with these newcomers, Dick. Thank the Lord, lad, you haven't a million to addle your brains and soften your bones."

"Did the million do it?" asked Dick.

"Well, not altogether," was the grim answer. "A million or so would not be such a bad thing for you or me; but in this case, with doctors and doting mothers and French monkeys to help along, I am afraid it will prove fatal. Look there," and the old gentleman paused at a turn of the road and pointed back to the porch. "They've got him in a patent air-cushioned rolling chair with an umbrella over it to keep off God's sunshine, when he ought to be tumbled out on the lawn to scramble around until those legs of his find out what they were made for. But with a rubber-tired rolling chair cushioned in satin, and two French popinjays like those dancing around him, I am afraid we have a bad case, Doctor Dick."

"If you want him tumbled out on the lawn," said Dick, "I'll tumble him for you."

"No, no," laughed the doctor. "We are not going in for such heroic practice just yet, though I must say you began bravely yesterday, Dick. But there's one thing you can do

for the poor little chap, Dick. Spare an hour or so occasionally to that padded chair. Cut out that yellow-faced jackanapes that runs around with him, and give the lad a breezy push over the hills, and some healthy boy talk about horses, dogs, guns, rabbit-traps, anything but his wretched, sickly self. And if between us we can get him on his legs"—the doctor's keen eyes softened as they fell on Dick's patched jacket and brimless hat, and he thought what a fraction of his young patient's income could do for this bright, fatherless boy—"I'll divide fees with you, Dick," he added as he swung himself up on the gray mare that had been patiently browsing on Aunt Beth's sweet-williams. And nodding cheerily to his small confrère, Doctor Deane rode off through the gate.

"Gee! that would be a job!" thought Dick ruefully, as from the bend of the road he surveyed the rolling chair propelled by the jackanapes up and down the porch. "I'd rather tackle a baby-carriage full of twins than push a thing like that."

And in deep boyish disgust Dick betook himself to the river for a morning's fishing. It

was an hour's walk to the noble stream that wound, broad and beautiful, below these wooded hills, but the tramp was nothing to sturdy Dick. Scrambling by short cuts over rocks, wading through brooks, he soon reached the shore where, high upon the oak-shaded cliff, the old Mission of St. Bride's had stood for more than two hundred years. Stately churches had taken up the work begun in this humble little chapel where, long ago, the Indians had gathered around the strange "black robe" to hear for the first time the glad tidings he had brought to this New World. But the Mission bell still sent its olden call over river and shore, and holy men, worn with their labors in busier fields, came to this quaint, almost forgotten spot to find rest and health.

For the past three years this ancient fortress of the Faith had been held by Father Felix, an old soldier of the cross broken sadly by the toils and privations of mission life in the far East. There were whispers of a terrible martyrdom barely escaped by the aid of faithful Christians, but of this no one had ever heard Father Felix speak. He was a tall, white-haired old man with bright, kindly eyes,

whose clear vision, after sweeping the whole field of earthly knowledge, had been lifted in childlike faith to the sky.

There were no schools within thirty miles of Playwater; tutors and governesses were out of the question. So, after Aunt Leigh had done her best, according to the methods of forty years ago, with her young nephews, she hailed with delight the good old priest's offer to teach Dick. And so for the last year our hero had been a daily visitor to St. Bride's, where he was making a triumphant progress through the rudiments that filled his tutor's heart with pride.

Though it was holiday-time now, he could not pass the old ivy-grown gate that swung half open on its rusty hinges, but turned into the Mission garden for a word with Father Felix, who was gathering the red roses that clambered over his southern wall for the chapel altar.

"Ah, my truant, it is you," said the old man, looking round with a smile. "I have not seen you since Mass last Sunday, when you dropped your surplice and were off before Brother Barry had the candles out. I had something to say

to you if you could have waited for my thanksgiving."

"Aunt Leigh did not feel well, and I was in a hurry to get her home," answered Dick.

"Ah, true, true. She came fasting to our good Lord," said the old priest, nodding. "You should have stopped at the house, my son, and asked Brother Barry for a glass of milk or wine. And that reminds me of what I wished to say. See," and he pointed to a long stretch of bushes glittering with shining fruit. "The currants are ripe. Brother Barry has taken all he can use, and there are too many even for the birds. Would not the good aunts like some for jelly and wine?"

"That they would, father," answered Dick. "We have a few bushes at Playwater, but none like these."

"Then come to-morrow, bring the little brother, and gather all you can."

"Thank you, father, we will," said Dick. "And now let me climb up and get some of the prettier roses for you that grow higher than those you have."

"No need, no need," said Father Felix, shaking his head. "The little roses are as

sweet in God's sight as the great, and they last longer on the altar. The great ones sometimes fall apart from their very size. Is there not a lesson in that, my Richard? It is safer to be little than great."

"Safer?" echoed Dick with a puzzled look. "But it is only cowards, father, who think always of what is safe."

"There is a wisdom that is not cowardice, my son, but that makes men brave and bold, fearless and strong," said Father Felix softly. "But I will not preach over my roses. Tell me how all goes at home. Have the strangers you expected come?"

"Yes," answered Dick ruefully.

"And your good aunts find them pleasant, I hope?"

"Not much," replied Dick. "The whole place is upset, father. There was never such a fuss at Playwater before. Servants and horses and carriages, and swings and rolling chairs, and a great big baby of a boy that has got something the matter with his bones, and has to be wheeled around with a pink umbrella over his head, as if he were a wax doll that would melt if the sun shone on him."

"Poor child!" said Father Felix pitifully. "I must go see him. And he has come to a good place. The dear aunts will be kind to him, I know. And you, my Richard, too. You are so strong, so bold, the good God has given you such health, such strength. You must help this poor boy to bear his burden. 'Tis a cross heavy indeed for one so young."

Dick did not answer. He could not explain to Father Felix how his sturdy boy nature recoiled from this weak, pampered newcomer, with his fair, girlish curls and his pink umbrella. For Dick's disgust at the new order of things had been growing steadily ever since Lester's arrival at Playwater. The anxious, hysterical mother, the helpless, overgrown baby boy, the dapper, smirking servants, had made such a bewildering change in the quiet old farm that Dick felt hot and indignant and resentful at this invasion of his home.

Something of this the keen eyes of his old tutor read in Dick's honest face.

"You do not like the poor sick boy's coming, eh, my Richard?"

"No, I don't, father," blurted out Dick frankly. "It is as bad as if we had a houseful

of babies. If he were a cripple like Dave White, now, who tries to make the best of things, it would be very different; but for a fellow twelve years old to be nothing more than a wax doll—" Dick paused feeling that the bright eyes fixed upon his face were not altogether approving.

"Ah, I see, I see," said Father Felix. "But one cannot always tell about these doll-boys, my Richard. There was one with me at college, so pretty, so dainty a mother's darling. *La Poupée* the boys called him, and he cried at the name. But the terrible Prussian war came; fortune, friends, all were swept away. *La Poupée* became one of the greatest generals in France. There was another—" Father Felix's voice grew softer—"a mother's idol too; fair and gentle and pure as a girl—one of my first pupils when I was little more than a youth myself. *Dolly* they called him, and he bore the name with laughing good humor even from those who loved him best. Dolly's real name is written among God's martyrs, Richard. He died a young hero among the Chinese when the missions there meant torture and death. So do not scorn the doll-boys, Richard; often they

make the strongest, bravest men. And now I must go put my roses on the altar. Such a lonely little altar it is all the week! Come, you shall go with me for a moment, and we will pray to be made tender as well as brave, Richard, gentle as well as strong."

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING FRIENDS.

DICK followed his tutor into the quaint old Mission church, and as he knelt for a few moments before the altar, where the lamp had burned faithfully for nearly two hundred years, the blessing of the holy place seemed to fall upon him. "God has given you such health and strength." Father Felix's words would come back to him again and again during this bright summer day, as he clambered over the rocks, waded out into the river, rowed across the stream and up the creek in the little skiff that was kept at the Mission wharf, enjoying to the full all the freedom and strength and health that were Heaven's gifts to him. It was sunset when he reached home, brown and wet and muddy, the brim of his hat and the best part of his jacket lost in a brier-bush, but

a string of silvery perch over his shoulder that told of a glorious day of sport.

The rolling chair with its pink umbrella was at the garden gate, where Lester, in a spotless suit of white flannel, his fair hair newly brushed and curled, had been wheeled to enjoy the southern breeze.

This morning Dick would have hurried by without a word, but now he stopped with a cheery, boyish greeting. "Hallo!" he said heartily.

"Hallo!" piped Lester in return. "Been fishing, haven't you?"

"Yes; and they bit like—like fleas," answered the young fisherman, rather at a loss for a simile.

"I've never been fishing in my life," said the young millionaire wistfully. "Once they let me catch crabs from the side of our yacht, but it was not much fun."

"I should think not," answered Dick dryly. "But to pull in a lot of shiners like these, I tell you is fine sport. And then there's the fun of climbing and wading and paddling along the river and creek, looking for good places. I struck one little eddy under Indian Rock

where I pulled up five fish in as many minutes. It was 'most as good as duck-shooting."

"Can you shoot too?" asked Lester breathlessly.

"Shoot!" echoed Dick laughing. "Why, every boy along this shore shoots as soon as he is big enough to hold a gun. Our Ted can hit on the wing now, and Pat—you haven't seen Pat yet—even Pat has brought down a bird once or twice. Of course they don't go duck-shooting, but I've been out with Colonel Seymour and Uncle Dan Dyer for the last two seasons. I tell you that was sport. We bagged forty birds in one day."

"Bagged birds?" repeated Lester curiously. "What for?"

"I mean we shot them—put them in our game-bags," answered Dick laughing. "And Uncle Dan and I got the most of all. We made a floating blind and went down Dyer's Creek, that is banked with wild celery. The ducks come there in shoals to feed on it, and Uncle Dan swears they have got so knowing that they put out pickets to watch for hunters and boats. But we had a blind, that is, a boat hidden by boughs and sticks so they couldn't

see it, and we got two or three good bangs at them. Gee! didn't we stir them up! You could have heard their *honk, honk,* as they whirred away, for a mile. One big chap tumbled across the creek, and another one on the point, and another in the water. I had to jump in and swim for them, for Uncle Dan lost his head and nearly capsized the boat. But I brought them all in," concluded Dick, "and I tell you they were whoppers, two of them four feet from wing to wing. I've got their tail-feathers yet."

"Oh, have you?" asked Lester eagerly. "Can I see them to-morrow, and will there be any wild ducks while I am here? Could I go down to the weir and look at them? Could Victor wheel me there?"

"Monsieur, no, no!" Victor, who had been standing in respectful silence behind his young master's chair, roused to quick alarm. "Wheel you after ze wild ducks! It would be quite impossible, monsieur!"

"It would not, it would not. You say that because you are a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow and don't want to be troubled." The boyish interest that had been kindled for a moment in

Lester's eyes went out and left only the pale, peevish face of a spoiled child. "Push me back to the house. I want to go to mamma; I won't stay out here with you any longer. Push me back, I say."

"But ze breeze, monsieur, ze pleasant evening breeze. Madame said you were to enjoy it here until ze sun went down."

"I don't want to enjoy the breeze, I am tired of it. I am tired of you; I am tired of everything. Take me back, I say." And Victor obeyed with a look on his sallow face that was not pleasant to see.

"Geewhillikins!" muttered Dick as he stared blankly after the disappearing pair. "I thought he was a boy for a minute, and talked to him like one. But he isn't. He is a baby—just a curly-haired crosspatch of a baby." And rather dismayed at the result of his first interview with Lester, Dick kept on to the kitchen door, where he deposited his string of fish with the delighted Uncle Pete, and went in to report to Aunts Beth and Leigh, who had begun to grow somewhat anxious at their boy's absence.

But neither Aunt Beth nor Aunt Leigh

was in sight, and wild confusion reigned in the great kitchen, where Aunt Chloe was still "wrastling" grimly with unfinished labors, instead of resting, as was usual at this late hour, in well-earned peace on the kitchen porch.

"Hallo! what's the matter, Aunt Chloe?" asked Dick. "Company for supper?"

"Company, chile, yes, de wustest sort," answered Aunt Chloe with an indignant sniff. "Lordy! I'd a got up fried chickens an' hot waffles for a houseful of our folks, an' been done wif it while I's a-foolin' 'long wif dese city folks an' dere airs. Dat ar peaked poony boy done upsot dis place, shuah. It's fresh-made chicken broth an' hot baths before he goes to bed, if we all hez to roast for it. An' it's been custards an' creams an' jellies an' all sorts of fixin's all day, wif dem two furrin niggers a-runnin' in an' out, an' buzzin' like bees in folks' ears till dere ain't been no end to de work an' wrastle. Miss Leigh gone to bed clean done out wif de worrit, an' Miss Beth hed to go in de dinin'-room to pour out de tea. All de best chaney an' silver out, an' 'pears ez if nuffin' was good enough. Sit down dar, chile, an' I'll give you some supper out here. Bress

de Lord, you's a nachal boy an' not a poor sp'iled, spindly critter like dat city billionaire," concluded Mam Chloe as she heaped a big kitchen plate with ham and chicken, drew out a smoking pan of biscuits from the oven, put a brown jug of honey and a cracked pitcher of milk on the spotless table, and let Dick fall to on this informal repast with the zest a "nachal" boy should.

Then when gentle Aunt Beth came out a little flushed and fluttered with her new cares, Dick was on hand to help, to comfort, and to cheer her as only a "nachal" boy can, setting the great crocks of milk in the spring-house, bringing fresh water from old Sweet which was still leaping recklessly down the hill, and chopping and splitting wood for the morning fire.

Altogether, when everything was done, it was a very tired Dick that stretched himself on the soft grass under the big apple-tree with Ted, his curly head pillowed on old Lear's shaggy back, at his side. The great Newfoundland had adopted Ted when he first came as a baby to Playwater, and had been his faithful guardian ever since. Aunts Beth and

Leigh and even Mam Chloe might be and were eluded by the mercurial Ted, but it was impossible to escape Lear's vigilance. Twice he had rescued his reckless charge from the river where it ran forty feet deep below Indian Rock; a dozen times he had found and guided home the small wanderer when his taste for explorations led him into unknown forest depths; and once when a severe illness threatened the boy's life Lear had lain for days, watchful and despairing, at his door. Woe to the hand that even in sport was laid roughly on Ted when Lear was by! The dog would show his great teeth and growl in a way that said plainly, "Beware!" And the crowning bliss of Lear's declining years was to lie stretched on the soft grass after a luxurious supper of chicken-bones, with Ted's curly head pillowed on his back.

"Has Pat been here to-day?" asked Dick.

"No," answered Ted, "and I didn't go there either. I've been home all day; the new boy has been showing me his things. Gee! you ought to see them, Dick. Games and picture-books and puzzles and kodaks and printing-presses, engines that go with real steam, and

an electric railway twenty feet long. We are going to put it up to-morrow in his room if Aunt Beth will take down his bed."

"Take down his bed!" echoed Dick in dismay, for Aunt Beth's great four-posters with their lace-trimmed curtains and valances were pieces of "resistance" even to a young millionaire's whim. "Where will he sleep?"

"Oh, his mother will rent another room. You see he wants to put up his railway and his Eiffel tower. And he has a magic lantern with pictures that move. He says he can have everything he wants."

"Can he?" asked Dick, thinking of the sunset scene at the garden gate.

"Everything!" answered Ted in an impressive tone. "Monkeys, dogs, parrots, ponies—anything. He says he is going to get a ship of his own next year, and sail all around the world; see the Turks and the Japs and every place. Gee! it must be fine to be rich as that, Dick."

"It is a heap finer to have a pair of good legs," answered Dick bluntly.

"Legs?" echoed Ted. "Why, everybody has legs," and he surveyed his own brown, brier-

scratched members inappreciatively. "And if you can sail and ride and wheel wherever you want to go, you can do without them."

"Try it," said Dick; "just try being rolled around all day with a pillow at your back like a sick girl. Think of a fellow never being able to jump or climb or run or dive or wade or swim, never being able to ride or shoot or fish, never being a live boy at all, but a poor, sick, weak crosspatch of a baby. Ted, you don't know how lucky you are. I didn't know until to-day. I wouldn't swap places with that fellow up-stairs for ten hundred thousand millions of dollars."

And while this heartfelt boyish *Te Deum* went up beneath the stars, the young millionaire was tossing restlessly on his bed, his thoughts turned into new channels.

"Mamma, can't I go fishing to-morrow? Won't you get a boat, and let Victor take me out on the river with the other boys?"

"My darling, my darling, I am afraid you would get hurt. The roads here are so wild and rocky; the boys are so rough. If you will wait a little, we will go to the seashore and send for the yacht."

"I don't like the yacht," answered Lester peevishly. "It was so close down in the cabin, and the smell of the cooking made me sick. I'd like to go with the other boys, and steer and row and catch fish. Oh, mamma, if you could just hear all the boys do up here. They swim and row and climb, and Dick goes out duck-shooting with a real gun, and he gets into a blind so the ducks can't see him—they come in crowds down here to eat celery, he says—and then they bag them, mamma, forty in a day."

"Yes, yes, dear; lie down." For Lester had risen up among his pillows with shining eyes." "This is all very well for rough country boys, but such wild sport wouldn't suit you, darling."

"Oh, but I would like it, I would like it," said Lester excitedly. "I would like to go hunting and fishing and rowing too."

"You shall, darling, you shall," said his mother soothingly. "I'll order a boat from Baltimore to-morrow—a nice comfortable boat with awning and cushions; and we will get a reliable man to manage it, and I will take you hunting and fishing, darling, myself. Only

don't excite yourself; your cheeks are quite flushed. You shall have everything you want. Lie down now and go to sleep."

"Fishing, hunting, with those rough, bare-legged boys," murmured Mrs. Leonard as her darling at last dropped off into quiet sleep. "It would simply kill him! Oh, I have brought him to the wrong place! My poor darling, I feel I have brought him to the wrong place. That blunt old doctor doesn't understand the case at all."

CHAPTER V.

FLUFF'S FIND.

DAY began early at Playwater; there was no napping or dozing after the sun's first wink from the eastern sky.

Big Bob, who had ruled the roost for the last dozen years, must have felt his responsibilities and slept with one bright old eye open, for at the first break of rosy light he flapped his wings, and sounded a reveillé that echoed through chicken-house and barn and stable. Though he were leagues away in dreamland, that clarion note of Big Bob's always reached Dick's ear. "Lots to do, to do," it seemed to call to him. "Lots to do, to do." And the cheery cock-crow certainly had a true note this morning that made Dick roll out of his bed before he could half-open his eyes.

"Tumble up, Ted," he said, giving a brotherly shake to the curly-headed little sleeper at

his side. "Aunt Beth has her hands full, and we have to help her. Wake up, I say."

"Oh, I can't, I can't. Let me alone, Dick; it's night yet."

"No, it isn't; it's day. Don't you hear Big Bob crowing? We've got the chickens to feed, and the cows to turn out, and the peas and beans to gather for dinner. And old Mac has to go to the blacksmith and get a shoe. Hurry up or we won't get off to St. Bride's for the currants to-day."

"Currants!" The call of duty fell faintly upon Ted's ear, but that last word was like a blackbird's whistle to its roguish mate. Currants! The St. Bride currants! Ted knew them well. Those long rows of jewelled bushes gleaming beyond the little chapel window had kept his eyes and thoughts wandering hopelessly from his prayer-book all the last Sunday's Mass.

"Are we going to St. Bride's for currants, Dick?"

"Yes. Hurry up. Father Felix said to come and take all we wanted. So move lively, Ted, and let's get through our work quick. The blackheart cherries are ripe too,

and just dropping off the trees like rain. Brother Barry was grieving yesterday that he couldn't turn an orphan asylum into the garden to eat up the fruit. He says there's a lot of poor little chaps in town that never saw a cherry-tree or a currant-bush in their lives."

"Why don't they come down here and look at them, then?" asked Ted, his blue eyes wide open now at such wilful blindness.

"Because they can't, stupid," said Dick. "Because they haven't any money, or any fathers or mothers or aunts or anybody to take them. We would be orphans, too, if we didn't have Aunt Beth and Aunt Leigh, so you had better be good to them, Ted, and help them all you can, or some day you may be whisked off into an orphan asylum yourself." With which dire threat Dick dropped on his knees to say his morning prayers before starting off on his daily duties, while Ted, thoroughly aroused by his brother's startling commingling of hope and fear, tumbled out of bed and into his little patched clothes, visions of currant-bushes and cherry-trees stretching before him in delightful perspective, for, though the strong spirit of manhood was beginning to waken in

Dick's boyish nature, Ted still lingered in the blessed paradise of childhood, where all is sunshine and gladness and the shadows of thought and care never reach.

Long before poor Lester, wrapped in a dressing-gown of Chinese silk, was rolled out on the wide porch to nibble at a daintily served breakfast, Ted's work was done.

He had driven the cows out to pasture in the clover-fields, his bare brown legs wading knee-deep in the dewy, fragrant bloom. He had fed the three families of wee downy chicks that had been his especial care since they had "chipped their shells." He had gathered two quarts of blackberries for the roly-poly pudding Aunt Beth was to make for dinner. And now, with his torn hat pulled over his sunburned curls, a big basket swinging from his arm, and Lear, watchful for mischief, at his side, Ted was off to join Dick, who had preceded him with an order for groceries at the cross-roads store.

Then for St. Bride's with its currant-bushes and cherry-trees! St. Bride's with its shining river for boys to wade and swim! St. Bride's, where Brother Barry could tell true, real mis-

sionary stories far more interesting than could be read in any book.

With such a well-earned day of delight before him, Ted was bounding gleefully down the box-bordered path when a weak, weary little voice called his name. "Ted, oh, Ted, stop a minute. Where are you going, Ted?" And Lester's pale face looked down wistfully from the porch at his sturdy, bare-legged little playfellow of yesterday.

"Lots of places," answered Ted. "Dick is waiting for me at the store now, and we are going to get cherries and currants at St. Bride's for Aunt Beth to make wine and jelly."

"Oh, don't," said Lester. "Stay with me, and we will put up the Eiffel tower and electric railway. And I'll show you how to take pictures with my camera and print. We will have all kinds of fun, Ted."

Fun? Poor Lester! Fun? Chubby Ted stared at the pale, wistful little face in wonder. "Gee! boy," he said, "you don't know what fun is. Dave White has got worse legs than yours, and he sees lots of it."

"Does he have to go round in a chair?" asked Lester eagerly.

"No," answered Ted, "he never had a chair to go round in. He was too poor to have anything till Brother Barry made him a pair of pine crutches; and you ought to see the way he flies around on them up and down the hills and everywhere. Even Dick can't keep up with him. It is almost like he had wings. And he can row and swim, and lie on his back in the bushes and shoot. Dave can do anything since he got his crutches. Brother Barry padded the tops with an old pew-cushion, and they are fine. I tell you what. I am going up to St. Bride's this morning," concluded Ted, "and I'll ask Brother Barry to make you a pair, and Dave will come down and show you how to swing around on them. You'd have a heap better time than you do now."

"The doctors wouldn't let me," said Lester hopelessly. "The doctors won't let me do anything. Victor, wheel me out on the lawn; I don't want any more breakfast."

"If Monsieur would only eat this nice fresh egg," pleaded Victor in his most honeyed tone.

"I won't, I won't!" And with a fierce, impatient gesture Lester struck the egg-cup from him, sending its contents in a yellow stream

down Victor's immaculate shirt-front. "I hate eggs and milk and chicken. Wheel me out on the lawn and let me alone, Victor."

And as Victor obeyed, brushing meanwhile as best he could the repulsive débris from his shirt, there came into his eyes the same look that Dick had noticed the evening before—a sullen, angry look, that, though quickly veiled by downcast lids, was neither good nor pleasant to see.

Ted, after staring for a moment in blank amazement at Lester's petulant outburst, bounded on his merry way along the garden path, and through the gate and down the cliff where the springs were tumbling and singing in full chorus, old Sweet leading in a deep sub-bass, broken into strange tremors of harmony as he foamed and quavered over the rocks, until at last, with a great shower of spray that glimmered into rainbows, he made a final leap from a mossy ledge, and vanished in a fissure of the rocks below. Fluttering like a big butterfly on these rocks this morning was a pink sunbonnet that Ted greeted with a gleeful shout: "Pat, come on. We are going for cherries and currants to St. Bride's."

"I can't," came the choking, sobbing answer. "Oh, Ted, come help me, please. I've lost Fluff."

"Where? how?" asked Ted, reaching the little mourner's side in two bounds.

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know." The pink sunbonnet was shaking with Pat's sobs now. "I was coming up to see you all, and I let Fluff down to frisk in the grass, for her leg is nearly all right now, and all of a sudden she went I don't know where."

"Call her," suggested Ted. "Here, puss, puss, puss, Fluffy, kitty."

"Oh, it's no use," wailed Pat. "I've been calling her and looking for her. It was just here I missed her."

"You didn't—didn't hear her squeal, did you?" asked Ted apprehensively.

"No," answered Pat, "I didn't hear anything. I saw her jumping over the grass one minute, and then—then she was gone. Oh, my darling Fluff, when I have been nursing her for three whole days on fresh cream in mamma's old work-basket!"

"Maybe she has tumbled down a hole somewhere and can't get out. Lear could find her

quick enough, if he would, but he hates cats. Hark! what was that, Pat?" as a faint muffled sound came from somewhere beneath their feet.

"It's a mew. It's Fluff's mew!" cried Pat excitedly. "Oh, where can she be, Ted?"

"Down in the ground," answered Ted. "Hi! Lear, old boy," as the dog pricked up his ears at this faint challenge of a hated race, "find her; find pussy." But though treeing cats had been the nightly diversion of Lear's earlier years, he was past the follies of youth now; a fearful encounter with a young wild cat, that had laid open his cheek and nearly deprived him of an eye, had taught him discretion. His only feeling for the feline race now was one of cautious disgust. His ears dropped again and he suddenly became deaf and indifferent.

"He won't do it," said Ted. "He won't hunt anything now; he is too old and lazy."

"Listen, listen! She is mewing again," said Pat tremulously. "Oh, we will have to find her, Ted."

"Stay where you are, Pat, and I'll hunt," said Ted gallantly. And he began to search

the rugged ledge with the keen eye of a country boy.

Suddenly Fluff's mew was heard with a curious rattling sound at his very feet. Ted parted a tangle of wires and gave a shout of triumph. Two small furry legs and a gray tail were waving frantically. Fluff, whose curiosity had been inherited from generations of mousers had gone head and fore legs deep into a tin box, where she was wedged hopelessly, the loose swinging lid having given way under her weight.

"Oh, Fluff, my darling, my darling! She can't lift her poor little lame leg yet," cried Pat rapturously, as with much mewing the furry little explorer was set free. "Who could have put that horrid box there to catch her?"

"There's a paper in it," said Ted, staring, "and with writing on it! It looks like a letter."

"Oh, it can't be," said Pat positively. "Letters have stamps and envelopes, Ted. It's a bill, and somebody has lost it with the box. Read it and see."

Ted unfolded the paper doubtfully. It was

inscribed with a few scrawled and misspelled lines:

"This is to say I am reddy to talk the bisness with you—I will be down to morrow night, but the money must be sure—I will have no Yankee tricks—Do not come near the house—I will meet you at your call—

"D——"

"That's all," said Ted. "D—what does D mean, Pat?"

"It stands for Dick," said Pat promptly, "and for Dave, and for Dan."

"But Dick or Dave didn't write this," said Ted.

"It says something about business and money," said Pat as, with the kitten on her shoulder, she bent the pink sun bonnet close to Ted's sunny curls to inspect the puzzling lines. A pretty picture the two young innocents made on the mossy ledge; but a pair of evil eyes, staring at them through the tangled wires, flamed with fear and anger at the sight. Faithful old Lear pricked up his ears and gave a sullen growl that made the unseen watcher call out sharply:

"Hold that dog of yours, boy, unless you

want a bullet in him. It's a bad lookout for travellers through these woods when you have brutes like that at large."

"Down, Lear, down!" said Ted, flinging his arm around his comrade's neck as a heavily built, sandy-haired man emerged from the bushes. "Quiet, old boy! He won't hurt you, sir."

"Gad, I'm not so sure of that," said the stranger as Lear still continued to snarl ominously. "About as vicious-looking a beast as ever I have seen. By law, you ought to keep him chained up."

"He never was chained in his life, and there isn't any law up here," said Ted simply.

"There isn't, eh?" said the newcomer with an unpleasant laugh. "No law either for man or beast."

"Oh, yes, there is," interposed Pat. "Because my papa is a lawyer, and a judge too; he puts people in jail when they steal and fight and cheat." Doctor Deane told mamma that papa was the cleverest lawyer in the whole State."

The stranger's eyes had no friendly light in them as they turned from Pat to Ted and

thence to the bit of scrawled paper in the boy's hand. Lear still growled. The small daughter of the cleverest lawyer in the State looked up at him as innocently as the kitten on her shoulder. The combination was a trying one. But long and varied experience had made the newcomer equal to all occasions, however trying. "You are a bright pair of youngsters," he said in a pleasanter tone. "Where are you going this fine morning?"

"Over to St. Bride's Mission," answered Ted.

"I'm out for a day's fishing on the river," went on the stranger. "That tin box you've got is just the thing I want for bait. Will you sell it to me?"

"Sell it? We can't; it isn't ours," said honest Ted. "We found it in the bushes there with a paper in it."

"A paper!" exclaimed their companion in well-feigned surprise. "What kind of a paper?"

"We don't know," said Ted. "It says something about business and money and tricks; and there's no name to it, only D. What do you think it means?" And Ted innocently held out the puzzling document.

"Fluff found it," explained Pat. "She

tumbled right into the box, and couldn't get out."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the stranger heartily. "Fluff found it, eh? No wonder; it's an old lunch-box rank with musty bacon somebody has dropped in the woods. And the paper—some darky scrawl about card-playing, I suppose. No white man would write such a hand as that. I'll give you a quarter for the box to hold worms."

"I don't want a quarter," said Ted. "You can have it for nothing. Down, Lear, down! Quiet, I say!"

"Your dog don't seem to like me," said the stranger with an unpleasant smile.

"No, he don't," said Ted bluntly. "You haven't been near any wildcats, have you, mister? Because Lear is growling like he smelt one somewhere near."

"No," was the answer. "But I have something that can bite worse than a wildcat when vicious brutes like that of yours show their teeth." And he pulled a pistol from his belt.

"Don't you dare to shoot my dog!" cried Ted, springing to Lear's head in passionate defiance of the threat.

"Keep him quiet, then, until I am out of his way," said the other, plunging back into the underbrush whence he had come. And though Ted held stoutly to his old friend's neck, Lear continued to growl and show his teeth ominously until the stranger was out of sight.

CHAPTER VI.

AT BUNNER'S.

MEANWHILE Dick, having concluded his "trade" at Bunner's store, was waiting with what patience he could command his brother's arrival.

Though Bunner's would scarcely have come up to modern requirements commercially, as a "waiting" place it was unrivalled, in fact, waiting seemed to be the chief business of its patrons.

A comfortable array of kegs and boxes and barrels was scattered around the porch for the convenience of purchasers, who lingered an hour or so, chewing, whittling, and discussing the news while Bunner put up their coffee, tea, sugar, calico, soap, or starch with the leisurely composure of one for whom the wheels of time had stopped at the surrender of Lee.

Only the sturdy honesty of his customers sustained Bunner, for his accounts were kept

in a happy-go-lucky way that in any other place would long since have led him into hopeless bankruptcy. "Talking" was the real business at Bunner's, and the musty old store, with its chaotic stock that had been accumulating for forty years, served simply as a field of operations.

Bunner himself, thin and stoop-shouldered, his skin tanned into leather by half a century of unremitting ague, was a born news-collector. By an irony of fate one ear had been totally deafened in his soldier days by the passage of a shell, but the other seemed to have gained by the accident the sextuple power of a modern phonograph.

"Half a gallon of molasses, Mrs. Reed? You want to trade for it in eggs. Wal, now, let me see. Eggs is so up and down they're hard to count on; wal, say a dozen and a half, if that will suit you. Set down there on that sack of bran and rest yourself a bit, while I fill your jug. All things going well your way, ma'am, I hope?"

"I can't complain," and Mrs. Reed shut her lips with the air of one who declines to be drawn out.

"I am glad to hear it, ma'am, very glad. I saw young Tom galloping by so quick last night, I thought there might be something the matter at Highlands."

"The matter is, he is courting that Dennis girl, and I mean to put a stop to it," said Mrs. Reed, thrown off her guard.

"Maggie Deane! You don't tell me so! Maggie Deane! Now who would have thought it? Not that she isn't a nice girl, Mrs. Reed."

"A nice girl, indeed!" sniffed the indignant mother. "I don't know what you call a nice girl. A pert, overdressed piece, mincing about in her high-heeled slippers, when every one knows that her father peddled oysters up and down this shore when my father was sheriff of the county." And the good woman, thus launched on a tide of family gossip, proceeded to recount Tom's bewitchment to the Deane girl until the dozen and a half of eggs were forgotten and the molasses-jug brimmed over at the barrel-spigot. But what were eggs and molasses to Mr. Bunner when he could retail the whole Reed-Deane complication on reliable authority to the next customer?

"The best of families will have their ups and downs," sighed Mr. Bunner sympathetically. "How much sugar was it Miss Wade ordered, Dick, my boy? Twenty-five pounds? Going to preserve, I suppose. Takes a heap of fixings one way or other for city boarders; but if any one can please finicky folks, it certainly is Miss Wade."

"Bob Bunner!" Mrs. Reed turned from her own woes with a gasp. "You don't mean to tell me the Wades are taking boarders!"

"They are indeed, ma'am; and a fine thing it is for them when they can get millionaires with more money than they know what to do with to come and spend a little of it about here. The French valet was in here last night with an order such as I haven't seen since I opened store, ma'am. Wax candles! Lucky I had two boxes put away since Judge Jessup's wedding. Port wine! I laid in a dozen bottles or so when old Colonel Green's cellar was sold at auction twenty years ago. French chocolate and sugar-wafers, and a dozen other things that I will have to order from Baltimore—"

"For goodness' sake!" exclaimed Mrs. Reed

breathlessly. "Whatever brought people that can spend money like that down here?"

"The water, ma'am, the water. I've heard it told by most reliable authority that there's enough lime and magnesia and such like biling away in the Playwater Springs to set up fifty apothecary shops. And the young chap that has all this money lies in a rolling chair all day and can't move hand or foot. The doctors have sent him down here to see if the Playwater Springs will help him. Who knows but we may have a fashionable watering-place here yet?"

Perched astride a flour-barrel by the door, Dick listened to old "Bunner's buzz," as the boys called it, very much as he would have listened to the drone of a blue bottle fly. But old Seth Burns, who had stopped for a pound of nails, and was leisurely stretching his lank limbs on a pile of grain-bags at Dick's side, chuckled at the last words. "Does look a bit that way, sonny. Two gents in a buggy stopped me as I was riding home last night, and wanted to know which way was Playwater Farm, and if ye took boarders thar, and how many men they kept on the place, and all

about it, even to the horses and dogs. I said I couldn't say much about men or beasts these days, but for kind, nice, fust-class ladies and good housekeepers the Misses Wade couldn't be beat in the hull State, and I'd show 'em up to the place if they wanted to go thar. But they said no, they was only thinking of taking a little hunting trip later on and couldn't stop now. Jest as well, too, I reckon," continued old Seth, biting off a chew reflectively. "Couldn't tell how or whar, but thar was something scampish about them chaps I didn't like. Fine-dressed and soft-spoken enough, but I tell you, sonny, when a fellow lives for fifty years like I hev up in the hills he gets the ways of the wood critters, and feels when things and folks ain't right. Jest as well you didn't get them chaps at Playwater."

"Yes, it is," answered Dick bluntly. "We've got all the boarders we can look out for now. Hallo!" and Dick sprang from his barrel delightedly as a brimless hat with a pink sun-bonnet bobbing beside it appeared far down the road. "There's Ted at last, and he has Pat with him. I'm off, Mr. Bunner. Send up that sugar and coffee as soon as you can."

And Dick bounded off to complete the happy trio *en route* for St. Bride's.

"I wonder at Mrs. Jessup." Mrs. Reed, standing with her dripping molasses-jug at the store door, looked after the pink sunbonnet disapprovingly. "She lets that little girl of hers run around like a tomboy with those young Wades."

"She couldn't be in better company," said old Seth as he rose with a stretch of his gaunt limbs and pocketed his purchases. "Thar ain't two finer little chaps in the county. Born gentlemen they are, like their father and grandfather was before 'em."

"They'll have to come down like other folks," said Mrs. Reed, whose temper had soured in the vain effort to sustain the family respectability of the late "sheriff." "Everybody knows Playwater Farm is covered by all the mortgages it will hold now, and the Misses Wade could no more lift 'em than they could lift the earth. They ought to put those boys to an honest trade instead of letting them fool away their time with Latin and Greek at the Mission. But it's none of my business."

"You're right there, ma'am, jest right," said

old Seth grimly, as he proceeded to tighten the saddle-girth of his old mare and remove the nose-bag in which she had been lunching luxuriously for the last half-hour. "I've allus found it 'bout ez much ez I could do to hoe my own row without harrying my neighbors." And swinging himself upon old Peg's back, the speaker turned away from this gossiping bit of the world, in deep disgust, and took the bridle-path that led to his own little log cabin far up on the river cliffs, where he lived alone with his dogs and gun, save when the city hunters came down in the autumn and made "Seth's" their rallying-place, and the gaunt old woodsman their guide and leader along river and shore.

What the lonely old man's story was no one knew, and even Bunner had not thought it worth while to find out. But more than once of late Father Felix had noticed the brown, leathery face and grizzled head in a corner of his little church on Sunday, though old Seth had vanished before the good priest could speak a kindly word. "It was Dave brought him," explained Brother Barry—"lame Dave that I made the crutches for, as ye know,

father. They are great friends, though Dave says the ould man is a haythin out and out."

But Seth, "haythin" philosopher that he usually was, had been disturbed to-day. "Drat that buzz-mill of Bunner's! It's wuss than an old woman's sewing-bee," he muttered. "Durned ef I don't row ten miles down the river fur a plug of terbacker ruther than go thar again. To hear them all a-buzzing and a-blowing over the Playwater folks like they was so many bluebottles. Makes me sick," growled the old man; and as if to escape more quickly from this buzzing, gossipy world, he turned from the bridle-path and plunged deep into the thicket and tangle of a short cut through the woods. It was a wild, sweet way he took, with the great arching trees making a twilight of the noonday, the birds chattering and twittering fearlessly in the leafy shadows, old Peg's feet falling noiselessly on the soft, mossy earth. Here and there great vines, knotted from tree or thick growth of young pines, barred the way, and Peg had to nose around for passage.

But suddenly, in the very depths of this seemingly untrodden solitude, there appeared

traces of human habitation. A stretch of crumbling wall, a weed-grown path bordered by a thicket of rose-bushes, hedges of box high as a full-grown man, and beyond, circled by overshadowing pines, an old, rambling, ruined house, dark, silent, ghostly even in the summer noontide. As for the night, even Seth, bold "old haythin" that he was, would have ridden ten miles rather than pass Pinecroft after sunset. Long years ago it had been a beautiful and happy home, with fair gardens and groves stretching down by terraced paths to the river shore. But human passion and pride had found their way into this paradise; a cruel murder had been committed there, and the blight of crime had been upon the spot ever since. The owners had moved away from the scene of tragedy; no one could be found to buy, rent, or live in or near the place, that at last became the unclaimed property of the State, while the wilderness closed about the old mansion, whose sturdy walls and timbers still defied the touch of time.

That Pinecroft was "ha'nted" it is needless to say; the golden fruit of the Hesperides might have grown in its garden untouched by

reckless hands. So gloomy were the traditions of the place that even in daylight it was avoided. Only his careless short cut brought old Seth near its walls, and his well-seasoned nerves were conscious of an unmistakable "creep" when he caught the sound of a low voice behind the box hedge that concealed his approach. With the quick, cautious instinct of a woodsman he drew rein and listened.

"About as dismal a hole as I ever put my foot in," continued the voice.

"Well, as I understand, we are not looking for a cheerful resort just now," was the answer; and the old listener gave a start as his quick, well-trained ear recognized tones that he had lately heard with instinctive distrust.

"Durned ef it ain't them two scampish chaps I met yesterday," he muttered as he drew Peg a trifle deeper into the shadow.

"It would have to be big stakes like those we are playing for that would keep one in a place like this two hours. Faugh! it's a regular charnel-house," said the first speaker.

"It strikes me as just the place we want," answered the other: "safe, silent, and not too far. We can't risk anything serious, you

know. Delarne says we can count on the old lady paying up within twenty-four hours. And if there is any trouble, we are close to the river."

"Have your own way about it," said the first speaker. "I thought it was all plain sailing among these rustic simpletons here, but I tell you we will have to be careful. You talked altogether too much to that old man yesterday evening."

"That doddering old idiot we met on the road?" laughed the other.

"That doddering old idiot, I have learned, was old Seth Burns, the best shot and the keenest-eyed hunter on the river shore. All the young bloods in town swear by him."

"Bah! what of it? Brace up, man, you're losing nerve."

"Gad! I believe I am. I haven't got over the shock I had this morning when I saw those two darned little kids with Delarne's note in their hands. If I had not come along when I did our game would have been up, for they would have whisked off to some one to puzzle it out for them. Looks as if something was working against us when kittens and kids take to blocking the game."

"Pooh, pooh, man! you've got the chill of this old vault on you. Come out into the sunlight; we can do nothing more to-day, so we may as well go back to our boats, where I have a bottle of stuff that will bring back your lost spirit. Pluck is the word, man. We'll be across the Atlantic with twenty-five thousand dollars in our pockets within two weeks if you keep your nerve. Come on."

The two speakers passed along the other side of the hedge and down the weed-choked road that had once led by flowery slopes and terraces to the river; while old Peg, obedient to the touch that told her master was watching game, stood motionless, as if turned to stone.

Not until the plash of oars came up from the river did old Seth emerge from his hiding-place in the pines.

"Now I wonder what them chaps is fooling about these hills fur?" he muttered to Peg, who, from long habit, he made his confidante in perplexing situations. Peg could only prick up her right ear attentively. "I couldn't ketch on to all that they was saying, but what we did hear, Peg, sounded cur'us, sure. Thar

was something about kids and kittens and twenty-five thousand dollars, and a deal more that I couldn't make head or tail of, any more than them soap-puzzles that Dave is allus working over, trying fur a prize. And it don't 'pear to be our bizness anyhow, Peg," concluded the old man with a quiet chuckle. "You and me is so used to hunting varmints that we can't even let the two-legged kind go by without nosing around their trail. But I mean to keep my eyes peeled fur them chaps, if I ever see them 'round these here cliffs again. They ain't a-going to board with those nice old ladies at Playwater if I can stop it. I don't like their looks, or their talk neither. If they ain't jail or gallows birds, it's only because their wings ain't full-feathered just yet." And with his shaggy brows knit in a perplexed frown, old Seth gave a chirrup to Peg that quickened the long stride of her bony legs and sent her briskly on her homeward way.

CHAPTER VII.

A JUNE MORNING.

MEANWHILE the happy little pilgrims to St. Bride's went on their merry way, no shadows of doubt or fear darkening the June sunshine for them. Even Lear, forgetful of his years and dignity, was beguiled into a race down hill, while Fluff, cuddled safe under Pat's arm, purred in peaceful oblivion of her recent misadventures. For the path to the old Mission was full of delightful diversion on this bright summer morning, especially to Pat, who, not being a Catholic, seldom came this way with her boy playmates. The wild laurel was in roseate bloom, and the banks of the brook were starred with white violets. There was the queer old mill in the hollow, and old Nance sitting among the sunflowers at her cabin door. Though Nance was stone-blind and fully one hundred years old, she had nursed

Ted and Dick's father and could not be passed unnoticed.

"Good morning, Aunt Nance. How are you?" they shouted.

"Bress de Lord, it's Marse Dick's boys," mumbled the old woman, tottering to her feet with the help of a knotted stick that served as a cane. "Come in, chillun, come in. Who is de little lady wif you?" her quick ear recognizing the rustle of Pat's skirt.

"It's Pat—Pat Jessup, you know, Aunt Nance."

"Miss Mattie's little girl. Lord, lord!"—Aunt Nance laid a trembling hand on Pat's bonnet—"I'd never a known it. How you've growed, honey, how you hev growed! Set down, all of you chillun, and tell ole Nance how everybody is at Playwater. I hear you hev company folks thar."

"Not company—boarders, Aunt Nance," said Dick bluntly.

"Shet up wif dat nonsense, chile," said old Nance indignantly. "Boarders, 'deed! Ez if fust-class folks like mine would take boarders! Dey may hev company dat pays, but boarders! Sho, chile, you don't know

what you's talking 'bout. I suttinly is glad you come down to tell me 'bout dem, fur de fool niggahs 'roun' hyah hez been making so much 'miration 'bout de rich city folks dat's come to Playwater. I can't believe de half I hears. You Phœbe," cried out Aunt Nance in shrill command, "take dat hoe-cake out ob de ashes, and fill up dat blue pitcher wif milk, and bring dese chillun suffin' to eat. Sit down on de bench here, honeys, and tell ole Nance how all de folks at de big house is coming on."

And with the pleasing accompaniment of hoe-cake, spread with syrup, and rich milk from the old blue pitcher, the boys proceeded to tell the old woman all the news; Dick being spokesman, and Ted breaking in with explanations and additions drawn from his personal experience the day before.

"De Lord!" exclaimed Aunt Nance at last. To think of folks a-rolling in millyons, and can't straighten up a rackety chile! I'll lay I could make dat boy walk fas' enough."

"You, Aunt Nance?" exclaimed Dick breathlessly. "Why, he's had half the doctors in the country."

"Sho!" said Aunt Nance scornfully. "Doctors don't know nuffin 'bout rackets. Books don't teach folks nuffin 'bout rackets."

"What is rackets, Aunt Nance?" asked Ted.

"I ain't a-saying what dey is," said Aunt Nance mysteriously; "dar's some tings dat ain't fur anybody but ole misses like me to know. But I kin cure 'em. Dar was ole Colonel Lightfoot's little gal dat de white folks was kerrying 'roun' on a pillow when she was two years old, till ole marse hired me out dar as nuss. I had dat chile chasing 'roun' de place frisky as a rabbit in three months, an' she done libbed to see her great-grandchillun. Dar was Judge Grayson's young Marse Jack, pining an' peaking fur ten years or mo'. Dey sent him up to Playwater, honey, in your grandfather's time, wif two niggahs to wait on him an' kerry him 'roun'—couldn't set his foot to de groun'."

"And did you cure him, Aunt Nance?" asked Dick eagerly.

"Cure him!" echoed Nance. "Dat I did, chile. In six months dat boy was ebberywhere. Dar wasn't a wilder or wusser boy in de whole county."

"And—and—do you think you could cure Lester, Aunt Nance?" asked Ted, his blue eyes opened wide with wonder.

"Dat I can't say, chile," replied Aunt Nance with a doubtful shake of her turbaned head. "Dat I dussn't say. I's weak now, an' I's blind, an' I's close to a hundred years old."

"You might come up to Playwater and try," suggested Dick. "They would pay you—gee whiz!—anything."

"I doesn't work fur pay, chile," said Aunt Nance impressively. "An' I doesn't work fur pride, an' I doesn't work fur folks to know an' see. An' I ain't able to shuffle 'long over dese hills no more. But ef you'll bring dat boy up hyah, I'll try what I can do fur him. I's got plenty of yarbs an' roots yet a-dying in dar in de kitchen rafters. I ain't no common niggah like dese black folks 'roun' here now," continued Aunt Nance loftily. "My ole mammy was an Injun, an' her father was de big medicine-man ob de tribe. Lord, Lord, chillun, I could tell you stories of dat big medicine-man dat would riz your ha'r on end."

"Tell us, Aunt Nance, please, please," pleaded an eager chorus.

"I can't, chillun, I dussn't." Aunt Nance shook her turbaned head solemnly. "I's been to camp-meeting an' I's got religion, bress de Lord, an' I's put dat big medicine-man behind me wif all his works. But my ole mammy was Injun to de last. All de parsons in de place couldn't git her on de mourners' bench. An' she could read de stars and de leaves, an' de running waters. She taught me a heap ob tings I dussn't tell—a heap ob tings, chillun, I nebber dare tell—nebber, nebber dare tell." The old woman's voice died off in a low drone, and her head sank upon her breast as she dozed off in the warm sunshine; for at one hundred years life is nearly all a dream.

"Done gone off agin," said young Phœbe, peering out of the door at her grandmother. "Mos' too peart this morning to stay awake long."

"Won't—won't she tumble out of her chair?" asked Dick pitifully, surveying the nodding old woman.

"Lord, no," answered Phœbe laughing. "She doze off dat way sort ob mumbling and jumbling all day. Skeers some folks; dey 'low de speerrits is a-talking to her; but it

don't skeer me. Going, young marses? Don't be in a hurry; hev some more hoe-cake and milk."

"No," answered Dick. "Thank you very much, Phœbe, but we have to go now," and they turned away somewhat briskly from the little cabin and its queer old mistress.

"Oh, I would be afraid of Aunt Nance," said Pat, drawing a long breath as they safely passed out of the whitewashed gate. "She looks just like the witch in my fairy-tale book, Dick."

"Pooh!" said Dick stoutly, "I hope you don't believe in witches or fairies, Pat."

"N–no," said Pat with some hesitation. "Because it's a sin if you do," said Ted decidedly. "Father Felix says so. He is preaching to the colored people about it all the time."

"My mammy was hoodooed once," said Pat. "She had a black snake grow round her heart, and it nearly killed her."

"Pat Jessup! you don't believe any such story as that!"

"Yes, I do," answered Pat. "My mammy wouldn't tell a story for the world, Dick Wade. She couldn't, because she waded out in Plum-

mer's Creek when they had to break the ice for the baptizing, and she got religion and was so happy that she shouted and jumped so the minister could scarcely hold her up, and she was nearly drowned."

"Gee! What did she go out in ice-water for?" asked Ted, his blue eyes open wide in wonder at such novel ministrations.

"She says ice-water is the strongest," answered Pat simply. "Mam said she felt her sins rolling right off her into the creek and sweeping away. And she has never done anything bad since, so she wouldn't tell a story about the hoodoo—I know she wouldn't."

"Then somebody fooled her," said Dick. "No person with any sense believes in hoodoos, Pat."

"Yes, they do," answered mammy's loyal nursling, her pretty cheeks flushed with earnestness. "My mamma believes, too, or she wouldn't have given mam twenty dollars to pay the witch-woman down in Walcott Swamp."

"Twenty dollars! to a witch-woman!" echoed Dick in horror.

"Yes. I ought not to have told," said Pat with quivering lip. "Mamma told me I must

not tell; but she could not have poor mammy driven distracted, so she took all the money she had for a new dress and gave it to her. And mammy took it to the witch-woman, and then she made her lie down on a bed of cedar twigs, and she gave her something to drink, while she built a fire of graveyard wood on the hearth and set the spell boiling over it. And mam went to sleep for a whole day and night—it took all that time for the witch-woman to break the hoodoo."

"And did she break it?" eagerly asked Ted, quite forgetful for the time of Father Felix's teaching in his interest in mam's story.

"Yes," answered Pat. "When mam woke up, the black snake was lying dead in the wood-ashes."

Pat had delivered this narration with such an air of conviction that Dick felt argument would be useless. With "mamma" and "mammy" both on her side Pat would defy all the theology and philosophy on earth. Happily, by the time the black snake was disposed of, the children were close to the Mission gate.

Brother Barry was propping up the big pear-

tree whose branches, weighed down with fruit, hung over the stone wall. Brother Barry was little and weazened and old, but there was a merry twinkle in his eye that forty years of religious life had failed to dim.

"Come in, come in," he said cheerily. "Father Felix told me ye would be along after the currants this morning. I'll be wid yez as soon as I get these cholera-balls propped out of the little naygurs' rache; they feed on them as if they were praties. What kapes the little craythurs from being kilt entirely God only knows."

"Gee! the trees are full this year," said Ted, looking up at the heavy branches.

"They are," answered Brother Barry with a smile of great satisfaction, for the Mission garden was the pride of his heart. "Though for the matter of that they always give us all we want and more. And the grapes! You should see the grapes this year. As Father Benedict, God rest his soul, used to say, St. Bride's always seemed to him like the Garden of Eden before man's fall."

And in truth a tender benediction seemed to rest on the dim, sweet, shadowy place that

even little Protestant Pat felt. "Let us sit down and rest under this tree," she said as they reached a big oak encircled by an old rustic bench. "Oh, isn't it nice here and good? It's the nicest place I was ever in, Dick." And Pat found no reason, as the blithe day wore on, to change her mind. Father Felix had gone down the river on a sick-call, but Brother Barry was all that could be asked in a host.

After his guests had filled their baskets, and feasted as well on currants and cherries, they found a more substantial luncheon spread on a little table in the grape-arbor: biscuit, cold chicken, and sugar-cakes, honey, and cream. Then, as the noonday sun felt hot even upon these shaded heights, and old Lear, panting as he lay outstretched on the soft grass, warned them that it was no time for a homeward tramp, the boys begged Brother Barry for a story.

"A story is it?" An' what should a poor ould lay brother like me know about stories?" said Brother Barry with the smile that wrinkled his face from ear to ear.

"Oh, but you do," said Ted, and Dick ea-

gerly. "He knows splendid stories, Pat, and they are all true—aren't they, Brother Barry?"

"An' sure ye wouldn't have me telling ye lies?" was the old man's reply.

"Pat has never heard any stories like yours," continued Ted persuasively.

"No; I never heard a real true story in my life," added Pat.

"Ye poor innocent!" said Brother Barry, looking pitifully at the pretty, cherry-stained face and tangled curls of this little stray lamb. "Ye niver heard of the holy saints and martyrs?"

"No," said Pat. "What is martyrs?"

"The Lord save us!" murmured Brother Barry, shaking his head. Then, as if inspired by sudden resolve, he added briskly: "Sit ye down here, then, on the grass where it is cool and soft, and I'll tell ye a story, a true story. It's about—about—well, never mind, I'll name no names, but every word is the truth. An' when I tell it ye'll know"—Brother Barry paused, seeking round in his simple mind for words that could reach the untaught little innocent whose bright eyes were lifted so eagerly to his face—"that martyr manes one

who loves God so much that he is willing and ready, ay, and glad, too, to die in His service." And with his three young listeners gathered around his knees, Brother Barry began his story.

CHAPTER VIII.

BROTHER BARRY'S STORY.

"Ye know where China is?" began Brother Barry.

"Eastern part of Asia," answered Pat promptly.

"East or west, it's the divil's own counthry," continued the old man, nodding. "God forgive me for the wurrud, for, as we know, 'tis He that rules everywhere; but if, as we're towld, the divil roams through the 'arth like a roaring lion, I'm sure it's in China he makes his headquarters. Haven't they the very picthur of him on their flag?" Mebbe ye've seen it—a great black and yellow baste with wings and horns, the very picthur of him that the blessed St. Michael but undher his foot. It's the murthering bad place, this same China, and ye may bless God, children, that ye'll never see it, and that it's thousands of leagues from ye across the sea."

"Were you ever there, Brother Barry?" asked Pat, who, with Fluff cuddled close in her arms, sat a breathless listener at the old man's feet.

"Niver, thank God!" answered Brother Barry fervently. "Though I ought not to say that, for it might have been the short road to heaven for me, and maybe a blessed martyr's crown at the end; but such glory is not for a poor lay brother like me. But it's the story of one that was there I am telling ye now. He was young and brave and bowld, wid father and mother and home, and money enough to kape him a gintleman till the end of his days. But he left all for the love of God, that he might preach His holy truth to the poor haythin that were living and dying in the divil's hold. So John—as we will call him, though that isn't the name—became a priest and a missionary, and was sent off to China when the divil's work there was at its worst. It's only betimes he rages; then the power of God puts him down, and he has to lie still like a black baste that can only growl and show his teeth.

"It was many a year that holy Church had

been battling wid him in China. There's books within the Mission here that tells how there were priests and churches and missions there more than twelve hundred years ago."

"How did they get there?" asked Dick in some surprise.

"How?" exclaimed Brother Barry. "Sure I wonder at a Catholic Christian instructed like you asking such a question. When did ever ocean or mountain or river, divil or emperor or king, stop thim that set out in the name of God to do His will? Look at your own counthry. How did Columbus and the cross of Christ come here?"

"Queen Isabella helped him," said Pat with a wise nod.

"She did," replied Brother Barry. "But it was for the glory of God and to spread the faith among the haythin, not for gold and silver he came. And so it was with the holy men that in all the years back went to China to plant the faith there. Now it was peace, now it was war wid them, as the ould black dhragon chose to lick or scratch. But whatever it was, the bowld soldiers of Christ kept on the same, landing by stealth or compliment as it chanced to

them, braving rods and chains and prison and tortures and death to preach God's holy word.

"And as I said, when Father—Father John landed there the divil was at his worst. In the great cities it was not so bad, for they had to kape up a show of dacincy to civilized nations; lest they should lose thrade; but away off in the provinces and villages no priest dared show himself, nor any poor craythur call himself a Christian or the mandarins, as the head divils called themselves, would be afther thim tooth and nail like ravening bastes. Bastes, do I say? Worse than bastes; a dacint lion or tiger was a gintleman to thim. Wid the lion it's a clap and a snap, and ye're done for; but wid the mandarin it was how long he could kape you trimbling and suffering in the jaws of death. Father—Father John knew this well, for sure it was no sthrange sthory in the Church. He had read of the cages and the cangues—"

"Pat doesn't know what cages and cangues mean, Brother Barry," suggested Ted.

"Sure I forgot the poor child doesn't," said Brother Barry pitifully. "And it's no fault of yours, you poor little innocent, that the stories of saint and martyr are sthrange to ye.

So I'll explain to ye what these boys well know. Prison and chain are not bad enough for the blessed martyrs in China, so the mandarins put them in cangue and cage. The cangue is a wooden collar, weighing fifty pounds or more, that the divils put around their prisoners' necks, and then shut them up in a cage where all can stare and mock at thim as if they were wild bastes in a show. And whin, by the grace of God, they bear that there's a dale worse to come. They are brought out and towld to trample on the holy cross itself; and whin they won't do it they are b'aten and tortured as only divils can bate and torture Christian men, and thin it's the cage and cangue again, and the thrial and the torture, until how they live at all until the blessed day of martyrdom comes no mortal tongue can tell.

"All this Father Fe—Father John knew well, but sorra a bit did it chill the holy zeal burning in his harrut or the bowld sojer spirit in his breast. He studied the language until the greatest scholar in the country was a fool to him, and he could rade and write it as if he were a haythin born. And thin whin the big ship that tuk him over reached the Chinese shore,

he put off by himself in a small boat, and made his way up the rivers and creeks into the very thickest of the fight, where the churches were being burned, and the Christians scattered, and the priests driven into hiding or dragged to tortures and death. And there he lived for years, and all that he did it would take, childer, a dozen books to tell.

"Sometimes he would be for days hiding in the bushes and swamps, or paddling in his little boat up the rivers to the house of some faithful Christian, where he would say Mass and hear confessions, at the risk of all their lives. Thin, again, with his face stained yellow, and dhressed in silk coat and pigtail like the rest, he would play the docthor in a little town or village, and so make his way to the poor sick and dying craythurs wid the last blessings of the Church. And more than wanst, in the same haythin dress, he was let into the cages and prisons of the holy martyrs before they were taken out to die. So it wint on for five years or more, and though there was prison and torture and death on every side of him, Father John wint on his way as if some angel guardian made it his business to kape

him from hurt or harrum. The very divil himself seemed to give in to him, for the mandarin's young son, who had heard of the Christian meetings, stole off to them wid one of his mates, and was converted and baptized.

"But the ind came at last. Wan day he was bethrayed like his Masther by a Judas that wanted the reward offered for thim that found the Christian praste, and he was tuk by the sojers and carried before the mandarin, and put in chain and cangue like the holy men that had gone afore him to their crown. Musha, musha! it was thin the divil began his wurruk in airnest. The times he was dhragged out of his cage and put to thrial, as they called it, I cannot tell ye, childer. He was bid to thrample on the blessed cross and deny his Lord, to tell who and where the faithful Christians were that had given him food and shelter. And whin he would do naither, he was stretched and tied with heavy rods, and his poor flesh torn, and his bones broke, until to this very day, childer— Arrah, what is it I am saying?"

Brother Barry's voice, that had been shaking suspiciously, broke suddenly into a sob, and

Pat, little Pat, who had been following the narrator's every word with parted lips and widening eyes, burst into a very wail of woe.

"Oh, don't tell me any more. I can't bear to hear any more"—and the little speaker sprang to her feet sobbing and trembling—"unless — unless" — and her voice quivered hopefully — "unless poor Father John got away. Oh, please say God let him get away, Brother Barry." And then Pat looked up with a start, for a thin hand was laid gently upon her curls.

"Poor little girl!" said Father Felix, who had drawn near the children unobserved. "We must not break such tender hearts with sad stories, Brother Barry. Yes, Father John got away. Tell the dear little child how, my friend."

But a sudden confusion seemed to have fallen upon the good lay brother. "Sure I couldn't afore ye, father," he faltered. "Mebbe ye will finish the sthory yerself."

Father Felix sat down on the bench and drew little Pat and her kitten to his side. And as he softly stroked back the curls from her tearful face, Dick, who had risen and stood

close to him, noted the lines and ridges that marred the shapely beauty of his hands, the strange red scars on his wrists, which long falling sleeves usually hid from view. And being quick at figures, Dick began to put two and two together most conclusively as Father Felix continued: "Yes, Father John got away, my dear child. You see he was far too old a Chinese fox to be held by chain or cangue, or perhaps not worthy of the martyr's crown."

"God save us!" murmured Brother Barry appealingly.

"It was little Ching Loo who saved him," continued Father Felix. "Did Brother Barry tell you of little Ching Loo, the mandarin's son? Though not as old as Dick here, he had the wit and wisdom of twice his years in his funny little shaved head with its long pigtail. And when Ching Loo got a purpose in that head, nothing could shake him, though the round yellow face and little black beads of eyes told no tales of what was working within.

"Ching Loo was a Christian, and so was his mother, as, by the grace of God, many even in the mandarin's palaces had become in secret. Ah! these Chinese are past masters at keeping

things secret. And so when Ching Loo found his white master, as he called him, in cangue and chain, not a wink of his black eyes told his grief, though all the time his young heart was aching and his quick brain working for that master's sake.

"One day when Father John had rather a hard time of it and was very faint and weary, Ching Loo brought him some soup. His mother had made it, he whispered, to soothe the 'white master's' pains. And the white master, who was very weak, drank it, as he believed the good God willed he should to uphold his failing strength. Then he fell asleep in spite of pain and wounds, and cangue and cage—asleep like a little child on its mother's breast.

"And how long that sleep lasted he never knew; but when he woke he was far away, in the house of a faithful Christian, who told him that he had been found in his cage, as all near him supposed, dead, and that, in terror lest some punishment should fall upon him, the mandarin ordered his servants to cast the body into a pit far away.

"But, maybe as you guess, Ching Loo and

his mother saw about that. For they had drugged the soup, as both the wise and wicked Chinese know how to drug it, with an herb that produces sleep akin to death, and they had bribed the servants who carried away Father John to his faithful Christians, and so he was stolen off into safety and lost his martyr's crown."

"Lost it!" almost sobbed good Brother Barry. "Shure if ye knew all, childer, it's down on yer knees ye would be this minnit, asking a saint's blessing."

"Tut, tut!" said Father Felix, rising hastily, 'you forget, Brother Barry, you forget. Are your baskets filled, boys, and has this dear little girl her share? I don't think I know her name."

"It's Pat, father," said Ted. "Pat Jessup. You know her father, the Judge."

"Ah, yes, yes,"—Father Felix stroked Pat's tangled curls softly, as if he were petting a little stray lamb—"Judge Jessup's little girl. So it is her first visit to St. Bride's. We must give her brighter memories of it than Brother Barry's story. Come, I will show you my pictures." And, still holding Pat's hand, he

led the way up the box-bordered path to the great front-door that opened into the wide hall of the Mission house, and thence into a big bright room, whose walls were lined with books almost to the ceiling. There were no carpets or easy-chairs or curtains, such as Pat's father had in his library, but the light streamed through two arched windows, beyond which the sunflowers nodded gayly and the hill sloped down to the shining river that stretched on either side of this wooded point far into the glittering distance. And directly in front of one of these windows stood a tall stereoscope to which Father Felix led his little guests. "Now we will beat Jules Verne," he said gayly: "we will go around the world in less than eighty minutes."

And perched on a high chair, with her bright eyes to the peep-holes, Pat proceeded around the world with Father Felix as guide. She saw the great ocean steamer as it left port; the wide stretches of sunlit waves, with other vessels in the distance; the whales, the icebergs, the moonlight on the waters, the pleasant scenes on deck and in cabin—all the charming details of an ocean voyage. Then

came the coasts of Ireland, the great cliffs of the Giant's Causeway looming up against the sky; the cabins, the villages, the churches of the Isle of Saints; England's lordly castles and old cathedrals; London, Oxford, Chester, and Windsor. Pat even had a peep into the royal nursery, and saw the little princes gathered around the knee of the still beautiful grandmother queen. Then came France and Spain, and Switzerland with its fair lakes and wonderful mountains; Italy, where Father Felix was a guide indeed, so much could he tell of church and palace and catacomb. Pat looked in breathless wonder at St. Peter's, and saw the Pope seated in the garden of the Vatican.

She had read of "Giant Pope" in her "Pilgrim's Progress," and it was something of a shock to see that Protestant bugaboo in the gentle, white-robed old man seated among his vines and flowers. "He doesn't *look* bad," said Pat softly to herself; and Father Felix, who had caught the whispered words, smiled and, showing a pretty view of a mountain castle, began to tell the story of the noble young Pecci who was born there; of his tender

love for his mother; of the wisdom, the goodness, the courage, and the charity that had led him upward step by step to the highest dignity on earth. "For Pope means 'father,' my little child, and it is as our 'holy father' this great man is loved and blessed all over the world."

And Pat listened wonderingly, and new thoughts came into her childish head, that were to grow and blossom as the years went by, until they ripened into the full and perfect Faith that was to bless her after-life.

Many more pictures Father Felix showed his little guests: ruined temples of Egypt, scenes in Turkey and India, pleasant pictures of tea-gardens, palaces, and pagodas in China and Japan. So blithely did the moments fly that the sunset was reddening the west when, with a last view of the rainbow-arched Falls of Niagara, Father Felix announced their world-journey was done.

"Oh, it has been lovely!" exclaimed Pat with a long-drawn breath of delight, as she hopped down from the high chair and picked up Fluff, who had been peacefully reposing in her pink sunbonnet. "It's been the loveliest

day I ever had in my life. May I see in the little church before I go? I have never seen a Pope's church," added Pat with new interest.

And so, in the soft glow of the summer sunset, Pat found herself for the first time before the altar. The colored light falling through the one stained window in the little sanctuary, the tapers, the roses, the trembling beam of the little lamp, all were strange to her wondering eyes. But wonder changed into a sweet, trembling awe as her gaze fell on Father Felix kneeling before the tabernacle. The look on the pale, worn, uplifted face struck some chord untouched before in the childish heart. Impulsively she fell on her knees at his side. And as she knelt there, the old priest rose and laid his hand upon her head in solemn benediction; and though Pat little guessed it, she was given to God that sunset hour for life.

Dick was strangely silent that evening as the children hurried over the rosy hills on their homeward way. Ted and Pat had all the fun to themselves until the little girl was left safe at her father's door. Then, as the brothers turned homeward through the darkening woods, Dick found voice.

"Ted," he said slowly, "if I tell you something, you must keep it secret forever and ever."

"Honest Indian, I will, Dick," replied Ted earnestly.

"Brother Barry let the cat out of the bag without meaning it, Ted. Father Felix wouldn't have us know it, but it was his story we heard to-day."

"His story!" exclaimed Ted staring.

"Yes," said Dick. "I caught on, though you and Pat didn't. That dear old teacher of mine is a saint and a martyr. Did you never notice how his hands are scarred? Father Felix is *Father John*."

CHAPTER IX.

A WAKING UP.

It had been a weary day for Lester. New scenes and new faces, the arrival and unpacking of his treasures, simple Ted's wonder and admiration, had filled his first day at Playwater with some interest, but now all things had palled. The rough, merry boys were off, bent on fun, in which he could have no share, his mother was lying down with the headache of utter *ennui:* to her Playwater Farm was boredom unspeakable.

Lester's Eiffel Tower and electric cars had lost their charm, and Victor, after the egg episode of the morning, was as sullen as a young millionaire's valet dares to be. The rolling chair was wheeled up and down the porch through the garden-walks to the gate with the maddening regularity of unwilling service, while the hot stillness of the summer day deep-

ened and only the dull drone of the insects and the ceaseless song of the playing waters broke the noonday hush.

"Roll me under the big tree there and let me rest," said Lester at last, peevishly. "You are so stupid, Victor. Albert, who was with us last year, could amuse me half the day at a time."

"Monsieur should have kept Albert, then," answered Victor shortly.

"Couldn't. He stole money from mamma, and my watch, and ran away," said Lester. "But he told funny stories, and knew games and songs, and could play the jew's-harp. But you can do nothing, nothing to make it lively for me."

"No, monsieur"—a strange look came into the heavy-lidded black eyes—"not yet, perhaps; but I will learn. Some day I will make it lively for monsieur too."

"I wish you would," said Lester languidly, "for this is a very dull place. I am tired of it already."

"If madame would permit," said Victor, his eyes and voice growing eager, "I could take monsieur into the woods beyond, where the

waters leap, and down the road to the river. Monsieur could sit on the rocks and fish until we get a boat."

"Then I will ask mamma to-morrow," answered Lester. "Only the other boys must come too, Victor. I would not go fishing with a dull fellow like you alone. We will take the other boys, and have a basket packed with lunch and make a picnic of it in the woods. And perhaps Dick will take his gun and let me shoot."

Victor's face fell. The boys and the gun were evidently parts of the programme not to his mind.

"Ah, I would be afraid of that, monsieur, very much afraid," he said hastily. "You might get hurt. And these country boys are so wild, so rough; never have I seen greater young savages. Think how they turned the water on you the day that you came. *Miséricorde!* it might have killed you."

"But it didn't, you see; it didn't hurt me a bit," answered "monsieur" quite gayly. "But oh, what a swish, what a rush it was! And the doctor and poor mamma!" Lester burst into a ringing laugh that quite electrified his attendant, it was so boyish and natural.

"It was horrible. Madame has not recovered from the shock yet. Monsieur, never could I consent to take you out with these wild boys," continued Victor virtuously. "They might turn you over on the rocks or into the river in their rough sport, and mine would be the blame, the r-r-responsibility. My char-r-racter"—Victor rolled his *r*'s most impressively—"would be gone for-r-rever, monsieur."

"Ah, that would be bad," said Lester dryly. "I do not know which is worse, Victor, to have a valet with a good character or, like Albert, without one." And having reached the shadow of the big trees beneath which the spring bubbled up under their broken arches, Lester had his chair-back lowered to a comfortable angle, and, pillowed on cushions of silk and down, the young millionaire prepared to indulge in a luxurious siesta.

But sleep would not come. A thousand restless thoughts and fancies seemed fluttering through Lester's mind to-day. Was it the voice of old Sweet bubbling up in merry music beside him that gurgled of the sunny hillsides and the shining river, of silvery fish leaping

to hook and line, of trees to be climbed, and rocks to be scrambled, and wide, cool waves that might be waded and splashed by bare young feet?

Ted had told him of all this yesterday. Dick had given him wider boyish knowledge last night. Both had turned indifferently from his costly toys and games to tread the paradise of boyhood closed forever to his helpless feet.

But old Sweet was singing to-day, a song of hope and cheer, as he leaped up through the broken stones and, bursting all bounds, went foaming and dashing down the hill. So cheery was the music that Lester's languid frame seemed to thrill and tingle to the sound, and fancy grew wilder and brighter. Why should he sit here bound and helpless, when all things else were glad and free—when even lame Dave, with "legs worse than his," was springing blithely over the hills? If he could only steal away for one gay hour, and creep, roll, tumble like the poor little boys who had neither Victors nor invalid chairs nor prospective millions! If he could borrow Dave's crutches and try how they worked; if he could only have

one merry frolic with Dick and Ted on the hills and the river!

Ah, old Sweet's spell was upon Lester already; the glad, daring spirit of boyhood was beginning to waken in his breast, new life to stir in his languid frame.

When the boys came home that evening after having left Pat and Fluff safe at Jessup Manor, they found Lester awaiting them at the gate with bright welcome in his eyes, curious and eager to hear where they had been and all that they had done. The ripest currants and cherries were put upon Lester's plate for supper, and Brother Barry's story retold that evening while Dick and Ted and Lear gathered around the rolling chair under the big oak. In short, despite the great gulf of difference that yawned between them, Lester and his young hosts, with the ingenuousness of boyhood, were growing "chums."

Dick and Ted found that there were things that even Lester could do. Victor brought out mandolin and banjo at his young master's bidding, and the delicate hands touched the strings into music that held the listeners breathless with delight. And Lester had stor-

ies to tell, too. Not of hunting and fishing indeed, but very fairy tales of wonder to the simple boys whose lives had been bounded by their own river and forest. He had seen the orange-groves of Florida, the mighty redwoods of California, the marvels of Niagara and the Yosemite. He had seen the elephants, lions, camels, and leopards of a dozen zoos. He had travelled in his private car across the Rockies, sailed in his own yacht from Maine to the Gulf.

"He isn't such a baby girl after all," said Dick that night when he and Ted rolled into their little nest under the farmhouse eaves.

"Baby girl! You can bet he isn't," answered Ted emphatically. "I tell you, Dick, if he only had a pair of Brother Barry's crutches he would be a first-class boy."

And this was the beginning of things that filled the model Victor with deep disgust. His genteel attendance was at an end; the rolling chair no longer went on its proper round over lawn and garden path, but must be wheeled to stable, to barnyard, to pasture, wherever, within reach of the house, the boys' bare brown feet led. Lester must see Dick milk the cows, and Ted feed the downy young chickens; he

must know how the old hens made their nests in the sweet-smelling hay; he must follow over the stubbly ground when Ted gathered beans and tomatoes in the kitchen-garden, and watch Dick pick the apples for the dinner potpie. And when the morning work was done Victor must lift him on his Persian rug to the soft grass under the shadow of the old oak, and bring down his favorite games for his new comrades' amusement, while they all feasted royally on Aunt Beth's fresh gingerbread and rich milk.

"Ze little devil!" muttered Victor under his breath, as he mopped his face before sitting down with Fifine to their own midday luncheon in the little breakfast-room that was their especial domain. "He drives me like a cart-horse."

"Ah, *mon ami*, yes, it is too bad," murmured Fifine sympathetically. "And such a desolate place. *Misericorde!* it fills me with horror. No dancing, no music, no fashion, no nossing. Why it was you persuaded me to come with madame I cannot tell."

"Wait a while, only a little while, my angel, and you will see," said Victor, his sullen eyes brightening. "I will have money, my Fifine,

money enough to marry you, *ma belle*, and give you a silk dress like madame's, and a diamond ring, and all that you wish; and we will go back to *la belle France*, and open a little shop, and be gay and happy forever."

"Ah, talk, talk, all talk," said Fifine, tossing her glossy head coquettishly, while she helped her companion generously to the home-cured ham and snowy bread. "*Ciel!* How can any one make money here?"

"Ah, that is my business, *ma chère*," said Victor—"business that I must not tell."

"But if I am to be your wife, Victor, you should keep no secrets from me. But I see. *Pouf, pouf*, that is all your words mean: breath, only breath."

"My angel, no, no; all that I say I mean. But I dare tell you no more, because you are a woman, *ma chère*, and soft and tender and gentle, and for the work I have to do one must be bold and br-r-rave and str-r-rong," concluded Victor, swelling his breast and rolling his *r*'s melodramatically.

"*Mon Dieu*, you frighten me, Victor. Surely you would not turn bandit. And if you did," Fifine laughed softly, "*misericorde*, there are

only the apple-trees to rob. Even madame would not bring her jewels here. She left them all safely locked up at home."

"All her jewels?" repeated Victor. "Ah, *non*, *mon ami*, there is one she has with her, the greatest, the most precious of all."

"But I have not seen it," said Fifine in perplexity. "Is it her diamond pin? her ruby ring? her amethyst brooch?"

"No, it is neither diamond nor ruby nor amethyst, *ma chérie*," answered Victor as he rose from the table. "It is more precious to madame than all these, more precious than all the gold and silver and jewels in the world. Look," and he pointed through the vine-veiled window at the merry group under the oak. "It is there!"

"Little monsieur," said Fifine gayly. "Ah, I see, I read the riddle. Little monsieur is the jewel that madame has brought with her, the most precious jewel she has; truly that is so. But, ah, no one will ever want to buy or borrow or steal little monsieur."

"Hush, hush!" Victor laid his hand roughly on Fifine's arm. "Pardon, my angel, but there is danger in such words. Steal

little monsieur? Who would think of it, Fifine?"

"Who indeed?" echoed Fifine with another laugh. And Victor's heavy lids fell to hide a look in his black eyes that Fifine was too merry and simple to see.

Meanwhile there was happy chattering under the old oak that put the blackbirds to shame. Dick was telling of old Nance.

"Is she a witch?" asked Lester, prepared for all sorts of primitive revelations in this new world.

"Witch? No," laughed Ted. "You don't think we are fools enough to believe in witches, Lester Leonard? But lots of the colored people think she is, and believe she can hoodoo and cast spells. Father Felix tries to teach them better, but only our own people listen to him, and even some of them are stealing off to old Nance now. They say the ghosts at Pinecroft are waking up again, and something awful is going to happen."

"Where is Pinecroft?" asked Lester eagerly.

"Oh, it's a tumble-down old place about eight miles from here," Dick answered. "A man was murdered there a long time ago, when

Aunt Leigh was a little girl, and no one has liked to live there, for folks say it has been haunted ever since. Isn't that so, Uncle Pete?" asked Dick of the old man, who came by just then trundling a barrow of potatoes. "Isn't Pinecroft haunted?"

"I ain't saying, Marse Dick, I ain't saying," answered Uncle Pete, shaking his grizzled head gravely. "Nebba was de sort to go circulating niggah stories 'mong young white gentlemen. Miss Leigh she dun sot agin' it plumb."

"Oh, you needn't circulate any stories," said Dick. "Just sit down and tell us what's the matter at Pinecroft, Uncle Pete."

The old man sat down on his barrow and mopped his head, evidently brimful of forbidden knowledge. "What's folks been telling you chillun 'bout Pinecroft?" he asked severely. "I lay some of dese no-'count new niggahs has been filling yo' heads wif lies. Nex' t'ing you'll be getting shy and skeery ez dem low-down white trash under de cliffs. You couldn't buy one of dem boys to go a quarter of a mile from Pinecroft for a hundred dollars down. Say, you can hear de chains clanking and de voices a-groaning dat fur from de house. And dat

fool niggah Jim Digges come home ash-color de oder night, 'lowed he seen a fiery face shining t'rough de trees big as de full moon."

"Maybe it was the full moon," said Dick skeptically.

"It couldn't be, 'cause it grinned at him, sah," replied Uncle Pete, "grinned and showed its teeth like it wanted to bite. I ain't a-swearing to what Jim Digges says," continued Uncle Pete conscientiously, "but de moanings I'se heern myself clar down to de ribber shore."

"What kind of moaning was it, Uncle Pete?" asked Dick, feeling now that he had the old man launched on the full tide of gruesome story.

"Sperrit moaning," replied Uncle Pete solemnly. "Dem dat has heard sperrit moaning nebba forgets it, chillun, cos it's only de lost sperrits dat moan. An' when you hear dat low kind of wail a-trembling troo de darkness, it makes your h'ar riz and your blood curdle, and de berry marrow ob your bones grow cold. An' dat's de kind ob moaning dat's going on around Pinecroft now."

"What do you think it means, Uncle Pete?" asked Ted breathlessly.

"I dunno, chile, I dunno. Some folks say

one thing and some t'other; but it ain't no good sure. Been a-looking fur suthing cur'us to happen myself," added Uncle Pete cheerfully. "Ebbah since old Sweet busted out in full flow dis spring I knowed dar was some sort ob luck coming. De preachers down to de camp in Jude's woods 'lows it's de end ob de world dat's nigh. Bress de Lord, if it does I'm ready," said Uncle Pete, rising from his barrow. "I ain't a-running to ole Nance for har's feet and snake-skins to keep old Satan's claws offen me. I's ready when de trumpet sounds. An' you all better be too, chillun," continued the old man. "Min' you I ain't saying anything is a-gwine ter happen, but thar's a heap of cur'us signs around dese shores jest now." And leaving his young hearers impressed despite themselves, the grizzled old oracle wheeled his barrow away.

CHAPTER X.

SUNSET SHADOWS.

THE sun was setting at Playwater; the rosy beams trembling through the trees had all the tender sadness of a farewell. The cows had been milked, the horses stabled, the chickens fed, and, all their work done, Dick and Ted were perched upon the railing of the kitchen porch swinging their bare brown legs luxuriously and watching Aunt Beth, who at the open window was beating up a sally-lunn for the morrow's breakfa t. It was Aunt Chloe's evening off, and the wide kitchen was in the spotless repose that always marked gentle Aunt Beth's undivided reign. Skillets and pans winked back the fading sunbeams; the fire had died into a cheery bed of embers. Aunt Leigh sat by the doorway, her taper fingers busy with fine tatting, while Aunt Beth

whisked eggs and milk and flour together with the practised hand of an artist. No one but Aunt Beth could evolve such feathery loaves of golden breakfast bread as came from the Playwater ovens each morning. Even Fifine, versed in all the mysteries of her national art, declared Miss Wade's "Sarah Loons" beyond French skill.

"You are working yourself to death, sister," said Aunt Leigh. "Why can't you let Chloe make Maryland biscuit in the morning?"

"Really, this is no trouble, Leigh dear," answered Aunt Beth cheerily. "And the children all love it, especially poor little Lester; he took two slices yesterday morning. I really think he is improving; there was quite a touch of color in his cheeks to-day."

"And his mother thought he was feverish and put him to bed for it," said Aunt Leigh grimly.

"Victor told her so," interposed Dick. "He was tired of wheeling Lester around. Of all the lazy, good-for-nothing"—

"Hush, hush, my dear," said Aunt Beth. "It isn't your place nor mine to find fault with Mrs. Leonard's servants. Though I must say

the man is not prepossessing, Leigh. There is a hang-dog look about him I don't like."

"Nor I," said Aunt Leigh, nodding; "though we must not judge by looks, of course. Mrs. Leonard assured me he was a most valuable man, and had brought her the highest recommendations. So, boys, I hope you will make no trouble with him."

But Aunt Leigh's gentle warning was unheard, for both boys just then gave a ringing shout and took handsprings from the porch rail as a ragged, red-headed figure came swinging up the garden path on a pair of crutches. "Dave! Dave!" was the hilarious greeting, "we haven't seen you for a week. Where have you been? Where did you come from?"

"Hallo!" said Dave with a grin that brightened his freckled face wonderfully. "You'd better be glad to see me without asking no questions, for I've brought ye prime news. And if ye don't mind, Miss Wade, I'll sit down here and rest for a minute before I talk." And Dave, sliding down from his crutches, showed himself to be a thin, wiry boy of about fourteen, painfully crippled. "I've come over from the Mission in less than forty minutes."

"Great heavens, boy! you must have flown," said Aunt Leigh. "Sit down, of course, and I'll get you some supper."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Dave, dropping on the steps and slipping his crutches beside him. "I might manage a glass of milk and some bread, if you have it handy, but it must be eat and run, for I can't wait for manners. Got to keep on to Judge Jessup's. Father Felix sent a message to little Pat. The altar-boys, fifty of them, are coming down on an excursion to-morrow, and Father Felix wants Ted and Dick to bring her over and see the fun."

"Gee whiz! that is great," exclaimed Ted and Dick breathlessly.

"Great! You bet it is," corroborated Dave emphatically. "They are going to bring down music and ice-cream and all sorts of good things, and go swimming and rowing. Brother Barry has borrowed every boat he can find, and he is putting up swings and seesaws, and old Seth is going to set up a target and lend him rifles for a shooting match. There will be the greatest time you ever heard of at St. Bride's. Thank you, ma'am." Dave paused to take

the generous mug of milk and plate of snowy bread Aunt Leigh brought out to him, and proceeded to bolt it in haste. "Got to hurry on to Jessup's," he explained between bites. "Father Felix has written a note to the Judge asking if little Pat can't come with you."

"Tell her we will stop for her bright and early," said Dick, "and oh, Aunt Beth, if we could only take Lester!"

"My dear boy, no; his mother would not hear of it," said Aunt Beth decidedly. "She thought he had been excited and made nervous to-day. Don't speak of it to him; it would only make him unhappy."

"Sorry for him, then," said Dave as, cramming down the last of his bread and milk, he swung up on his crutches again for a start. "But be sure you are bright and early, boys. The boat will be out at ten o'clock in the morning and won't leave until seven at night. We are going to have a day of it, sure." And he loped off again through the fading sunset, as brisk and blithe a messenger as if he were indeed on wings.

"Oh, mamma, look, look!" cried Lester, as

from his cushioned couch by the window, where he had been resting all the evening, he caught sight of the queer little figure swinging off through the sunset. "It's lame Dave, mamma, and just see how he goes!"

Mrs. Leonard looked, and a strange, sick repulsion filled her heart. It seemed a grotesque caricature of her own idol that mocked her anxious eyes.

"Oh, I wish, I wish I could go like that," sighed the young millionaire beside her.

"Like—like that!" gasped his mother.

"Dick says his back and legs are as bad as mine, but he can go anywhere and he can shoot and fish and row and swim just like the other boys. Oh, I wish I could go like that too. Won't you let me borrow his crutches and try?"

"Borrow crutches—from that—that ragamuffin!" cried his mother passionately.

"It would kill you, monsieur," said Victor.

"It wouldn't, it wouldnt," answered Lester. "Oh, mamma, if you would only let me try! If I could only shoot or ride or fish or swim; if I could only do something like other boys, and not be kept a baby, a real girl baby,

forever!" And Lester burst into a wild passion of tears that rent his mother's heart.

"You shall, darling, you shall," she said tremulously. "Lester, you shall go fishing to-morrow. Victor will manage it somehow—your own good Victor. Isn't there some nice, smooth road you can take him, Victor?"

"Oui, certainement, madame, there is," said Victor eagerly—"a nice, smooth road, and a place, madame, all quiet and pleasant and comfortable—most comfortable."

"Then stop fretting, dear, and you shall go there to-morrow. Bring out his English rod and line and let him look at them, Victor; get everything ready. Only don't cry like that, Lester, for it breaks my heart."

"And will the boys go with me, mamma?" sobbed Lester, still uncomforted.

"The boys! the boys!" exclaimed the half-distracted mother. "I don't know; I suppose they must. Go ask them, Victor; ask them if they will go out fishing with Lester to-morrow."

Victor went with lowering brow; the boys' company was evidently not to his taste. But there was another look on his face when in a few moments he came back. "It is impossible,

monsieur; they have to go to the Mission to-morrow; the priest has sent for them. But I will take monsieur and give him all ze pleasure, all ze happiness I can alone." And with this promise poor Lester had to be content.

CHAPTER XI.

DAVE'S ADVENTURE.

TWILIGHT was falling softly about St. Bride's. Wrapped in his long cloak, Father Felix stood on the porch watching the evening star trembling in the tender glow of the fading day and listening to the birds twittering their vesper song. Already the shadows were heavy under the oaks whence came the cheery voice of Brother Barry blending with old Seth's ruder tone. They had been fixing the target for the morning shooting match on a smooth stretch behind the house.

"It's up," said Brother Barry as he reached the porch, "and the swings too, father. It's fine shport the b'ys will have to-morrow. Everything is ready but the rifles, and Seth here says he will see to them."

"And keep on the spot, I hope, to watch the

young marksmen," said Father Felix. "I don't want any one hurt."

"Arrah, what harrum could come to them, father?" said Brother Barry. "Sure it's b'ys that's coming down to us, not girruls. The crack of a gun will put life into this quiet ould place."

"Have it as you will, then," said Father Felix. "You are master of ceremonies. Brother, all I ask is that our good friend here will be on hand to watch the shooting match and act as umpire. You and I are men of peace and cannot pretend to settle a game of war."

"I'll be here, never fear, sur," answered Seth. "And I'll bring the rifles with me, and powder and shot as well. Dave was going back with me to-night," added the old man, looking around for his young chum as Brother Barry passed on into the house to light up.

"He has gone on an errand for me. Won't you sit down and wait for him?" said Father Felix cordially.

"Ef you don't mind, I will," said the old man, seating himself upon the porch step. "It's a longish stretch up to my little place, and the boy might not want to take it alone,

'specially since there's been so many fool tales going round about h'ants 'long the shore. Pretty nice place you have here," continued Seth as he fortified himself with a big quid of tobacco. "I come up sometimes on Sundays with Dave to church."

"Yes, I have seen you," said Father Felix, smiling.

"Hev you?" said Seth in surprise. "I kept fur back ez I could, for, ez I told Dave, I hadn't no business a-pushing in with reg'lar purfessing members. But he said that didn't make no difference here."

"And Dave was right," replied the old priest. "Come whenever and wherever you wish; you will always be welcome."

"That's friendly, but I ain't looking to jine, ye see," said Seth cautiously. "I ain't the sort fur that."

"Why not?" asked Father Felix pleasantly.

"Too tough a lot," replied the old man tersely. "I ain't expecting harps and angel's wings when I die. No, sir, I wouldn't know what to do with them if I got them. I've been a hard, rough customer in my time, and I ain't got no right setting in for grace and glory now.

I used to go to the meeting-house down to Ryder's Mills once in a while, till I struck a revival, and the passon he come down 'longside me, and put his hand on my shoulder and allowed he was going to wrastle for me with the Lord in prayer. Made me feel sort of cur'us, and I've never been there since. You don't do anything like that here?"

"No," said Father Felix, "not exactly in that way. Though when I stand at the altar I am praying for you and all present."

"You air!" exclaimed Seth. "For niggers and all?"

"All," repeated the priest, smiling. "In God's house all are His children alike."

"I'm afeerd I never could hold to that," said old Seth doubtfully. "Black is black and white is white, and you can't make 'em the same any more than you kin make a rabbit and a 'coon. But I like it here fust rate. I like your music and lights and flowers; sort of cheerful after hearing the mourners at the meeting-house. And I like your preaching too. Whether it's gospel truth or not I can't say, but it's durned good hard sense."

Father Felix laughed softly; perhaps his

mind went back to other days when he had looked down on the congregations of great cathedrals, held spell-bound by his words. Ah, he felt he must win this simple, honest soul to God by plain "hard sense."

"Some one hez got to talk plain and square to the folks 'round here," continued Seth. "Blamed ef niggers and white haven't gone plumb crazy 'bout h'ants and devils. Ole Nance is a-selling 'em all har's feet and snake-skins and every sort of hoodoo truck. Lige Wilson, that bragged he'd give any ghost a black eye that come near him, bust into my cabin last night shaking ez if he had seven days' ague—hed to pour nigh half a pint of raw whiskey down his throat before he could find breath to tell he had been chased by a devil without a head through Pinecroft Woods. Jehoshaphat!" The speaker started to his feet, and even Father Felix sprang up in alarm, for at that moment, as if in corroboration of Seth's tale, a figure came with wild, unnatural leaps through the shadows and dropped with a shivering cry at the Mission door.

"Who are ye, what are ye?" cried Seth, springing forward with the fierce, angry terror

of a bold, fearless man. "Darned ef—t'ain't —Dave!" he gasped in another tone. "Lad! lad! what has happened to ye?"

"Father, Father Felix," panted the boy, dragging himself to his knees, "bless me, make the sign of the cross on me. Oh, I thought I was safe. I had my scapular, my rosary, but I saw it, father, I saw it at my very side."

"Saw what, my poor child?" asked Father Felix soothingly, as he bent over the trembling boy.

"The devil!" sobbed Dave wildly.

"You young fool, have ye gone mad with the rest?" blurted out old Seth savagely.

"No, no, no," answered Dave. "Give me a drink of water and I'll tell you, Seth."

"Bring a glass of wine, Brother Barry," said Father Felix as the good brother came in alarm to the door, "and help Dave to the porch, my friend; the boy has had a shock that has unnerved him completely. Drink this, my son," continued the old priest kindly as Brother Barry brought out the wine, "and then tell us what frightened you."

Dave obeyed, and then, steadied by the guarding presence beside him spoke in a quieter

tone. "I went to Playwater first, father, and then—then to Jessup's Manor, as you told me. And Mrs. Jessup was very kind, and said little Pat could come with the boys to-morrow, and made me stay to tea. And then it was so late, and I knew Seth would be waiting for me here, I thought I would take the short cut across the cliff. It goes by—by"—Dave paused with a shudder—"by Pinecroft. But I was in a great hurry, and I wouldn't let myself be afraid. For you had told me it was all nonsense; that God would not give anything evil from the other world power to hurt His children, and Seth said only fools and niggers believed in ghosts; and I had my beads and scapular with me, so I just swung along the road fast as my crutches could take me, singing and whistling by turns to make it lively, till I got nearly by the house. And then—then *It* jumped out of the bushes at me." Dave paused, shaking from head to foot.

"What jumped out at you, my boy?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," was the piteous answer. "It was tall, taller than the highest man, with big eyes like burning coals, and it threw fire at me and cursed, cursed

dreadful," panted Dave. "Oh, I don't know how I got away; it seemed as if my crutches ran for me, I was so scared and cold and sick. I don't know—how I got safe—back—here"—

"The boy has fainted," said Father Felix as Dave reeled back against the porch pillar. "We must put him to bed here for the night; and you, my good man," turning to Seth, "you will stay with us too. There is room for you both. This Pinecroft business must be looked into," added the priest when, Dave having revived under Brother Barry's care, old Seth stepped out again on the porch.

"Ay," answered the old man grimly. "And if ye know where I kin git a man that ain't afeerd to take a Winchester and go along with me, I'll look into it this very night."

"No, no, my brave friend, no. Venture nothing to-night. But I have thought of a way to banish all terrors real and imaginary from the place forever. And with God's help we will try it to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLOTTERS.

It was close on to midnight. Birds and boys and even flowers were asleep at Playwater, but old Sweet was still singing merrily to the stars. Bubbling, plashing, rippling over the rocks, the waters echoed all the music they had caught during the day in their midnight song.

The patter of little feet, the chatter of gay young voices, the tinkle of merry laughter, seemed to blend in the bubble and murmur that filled the silence, and made a stealthy figure creeping through the shadows mutter a foreign curse.

"A pest upon the waters! It is as if they were talking, talking night and day." And even as he spoke a pebble, loosened by his footstep, rolling into the tumbling stream below, roused old Sweet into a new burst of midnight glee. "Ha, ha, ha!" came the cho-

rused laugh of the waters through the dark stillness in mocking music that made the intruder recoil trembling into the deeper shadow in guilty fear.

"Bah! I am a fool—a fool," he whispered to himself after a moment's pause, and then putting his hand to his lips he gave a queer low signal, like the cry of some night-bird. Two, three times he repeated this, and then there was an answering call in the hollow below. "*Bien!* at last, at last," he said, scrambling down through the underbrush, to the great rock, where old Sweet with a last merry leap vanished into the earth. "Two, three nights have I come here, waiting for your call," he continued as another figure stepped out of the shadows to meet him. "I am not to be so fooled, monsieur, like ze dog to whom you whistle. I will have no Yankee tricks. What you say to me you must do, you must do, or I—I—what you call it?—I back out."

"You've been waiting for me, you say. Then you have heard nothing; there was no harm done; those little kids didn't blab," said the other eagerly.

"Blab? kids? I do not know what you mean, monsieur."

"Good, good! Our game is safe yet, then, Delarne," was the relieved reply. "We're in luck, prime luck. I've been afraid to come near the place for the last three days, for on my last visit I found two youngsters and a kitten poring over our private correspondence. They had found the note you left."

"Found my note, you say? Ze children found my note? *Misericorde!* then I am ruined. I am done wiz ze business, done forever this very night. I fly, I leave the place."

"Nonsense!" said his companion, "don't be a chicken-hearted fool. The note meant nothing to the youngsters. I took it from them and explained it with a yarn of my own, and since you have heard nothing it is plain they have forgotten the whole business."

"I am not so sure of that," was Victor's reply, for the midnight plotter was no other than Lester's model valet. "Were they the boys from the house above?"

"No, one was a girl, a mite of a thing in a pink sunbonnet."

"Ah!" Victor, who had never seen Pat,

drew a long breath of relief. "Then we may be safe still—though I do not know, I do not know. If my note was found, monsieur—"

"Pooh! I tell you there is no danger. I have waited two days to see."

"Monsieur has been very careful—of himself," said Victor dryly. "But what of me?"

"It was a case of look out for yourself, my friend, or *Sauve qui peut*, as I believe you Frenchmen have it. I could do you no good by coming here, and might have done myself a great deal of harm. But the trouble has blown over and I am ready to talk business."

"But I am not. I give up, monsieur, I give up. *Sauve qui peut* it is, you say. Ah, yes, and poor Victor left behind. *Non*, *non*, *non*. I will do nothing, nothing."

"And give up your two thousand dollars, you fool," said the other impatiently. "Brace up and be a man, Delarne. Two thousand dollars—ten thousand francs, just for putting a sick boy into our hands for a day or two."

"But if he should die," said Victor, trembling under the mingled strain of greed and fear —"if the terror, the shock, the fright should kill him?"

"Bah! kids are not so easily killed. I swear to you we don't mean to hurt the boy. We won't even take him away if we can help it. We have found a safe place to hide him while we squeeze the old lady for our price. If she is the woman we hear she is, she will pay up anything we ask in twenty-four hours. And two thousand of it shall be yours. Think of it, man! It would take you a lifetime to earn the half of it as you are now. No more bowing and scraping and boot-licking; you will be a free man forever. Ten thousand francs!"

"And Fifine, ma belle Fifine! monsieur; you have conquered. I will do it, I will."

"Good! I thought you would come to your senses again. It is the simplest piece of business in the world for you. We only ask you to bring the boy alone to some place in this wilderness where we can carry him off without a row. He is going to squeal, of course, so we don't want any one to hear him. Two thousand dollars cash down to you the moment we have our hands on the chap, and then it can be *Sauve qui peut* with you whenever and wherever you please. You can skip off before there is

any alarm, for naturally, as soon as there is, there will be a look out for you."

"*Oui*, *oui*, there will," said Victor, trembling again like one with an ague. "I will be blamed, I will be searched for. Monsieur, I cannot, I dare not."

"Dare not? Pooh! when did you get so squeamish, Delarne? How about that diamond business in Boston last year? Suppose I should feel it my duty to tell all I know about that?"

"Monsieur, monsieur, no, no. I will do all —all that you ask," faltered Victor humbly.

"Then talk quick," was the rough reply. "When and where shall it be? for we are tired playing ghost and devil round that old roost by the river to scare meddling fools off our tracks. When and where will you give the boy up to us? You ought to be able to manage it easily now; you have been playing angel guardian to him for two months. It is lucky madame had not time to examine your high recommendations very closely. Come, now, talk. When and where are we to get the boy?"

"To-morrow, monsieur," said the trembling

wretch—"to-morrow we are to go fishing; it has been my first chance to get him out alone. Always there has been some one to watch, to see, to hear, and the boys—a pest upon the boys!—they were everywhere with us. But to-morrow they cannot come."

"You are quite sure of that?" asked his companion anxiously.

"Ah, yes, monsieur, quite sure. I have asked. There is to be an excursion at the Mission, five miles from here, and they will go there for the day. Everybody will go."

"Good! that plays into our hands first rate. And you and your little monsieur will go fishing. Good again! We will go fishing, too. Where shall we meet?"

"At twelve o'clock to-morrow, monsieur, we will be at the Indian Rock, at the bend of the river, about two miles from here."

"Aye, I know the place, and the road that leads to it. Good! it couldn't be better. All right; we will be there, my friend, fishing too."

* * * * *

The boys were up betimes next morning. The dew was still thick on the grass when Ted and Dick, in fresh linen suits that made amends

for bare legs and coarse hats, were tramping off to Jessup's Manor to get Pat and begin their day of delight. It had been years since there had been an excursion to St. Bride's. Even Sunday-schools and sodalities found the gayer resorts with their "flying horses" and roller coasters more enticing than the quiet green old Mission by the river. But Dick had a dim, delightful remembrance of an altar-boys' excursion long ago, of the waving banners and joyous music, the limitless feasting and merriment, that filled the gardens and groves of St. Bride's with bewildering life and light, and he resolved not to lose a moment of this red-letter day.

The young Wades had been gone two hours when Lester awoke, three before he had his breakfast, four when he was wheeled out by Victor on the garden path, a pathetic little figure in the English tweeds and strong boots he had insisted upon donning for his morning sport.

"Give me the rods and fishing-tackle; I can carry them myself, Victor, and the bait—did Uncle Pete get the worms for bait?"

"Everything is ready, monsieur," said Victor respectfully.

Mrs. Leonard followed the rolling chair to the gate, reckless of the dainty French negligée she was trailing through dust and dew. "Be very, very careful, Victor, for these roads are rough. Oh, I wish he could have gone in his carriage."

"It would be impossible, madame; the river path is too small."

"And we must gratify him," sighed the poor lady anxiously. "But you will be sure and keep the smooth road of which you spoke?"

"Quite sure, madame."

"And go very slowly, Victor, so there will be no danger. And bring him back by two o'clock, so he can have his lunch and nap. Oh, I won't have an easy moment while he is gone."

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" said Lester peevishly as she kissed him good-by. "I am not a baby, mamma. Let me be a boy just for once." And Lester sat straight up in his cushions, and prepared to enjoy his unusual freedom; for it was a bracing day despite the warmth of the season. The fresh breeze that swept up the broad road bore a salt whiff of the wide ocean bay from which it came; the deep

blue sky was flecked by fleecy cloud-drifts that tempered without shadowing the summer sunshine; the air was fragrant with the wild roses and honeysuckle tangled amid the rocks; old Sweet foamed down the hillside in the maddest, merriest glee. There was not a warning note to tell of evil or treachery or peril near.

But Lester found it dull. Victor was poor company after bluff Dick and jolly Ted, and to-day he seemed especially silent and abstracted, watching from side to side nervously, and meeting all Lester's attempts at conversation with evident effort. A fishing expedition with this faithful Victor began to look rather a dismal failure, until, after a long pull through the woods, Lester found himself rolling gently down a smooth, grassy slope to the shore, where the great cliff called Indian Rock, rising from the inward curve of the river, had gathered round its base a sheltered stretch of hard sandy beach. Two fishermen were here already, busy with rod and line; and as Victor wheeled him out by the sunlit water Lester's spirits rose.

"Good morning," said one of the strangers.

"Glad to find you out for a morning's sport. Ah, you don't remember me, I see, Master Lester, but I know you. I was at the Altamont with you last summer. I am Colonel Leigh Burridge."

"I beg pardon, but I—I didn't remember you," said Lester apologetically. "I have travelled so much, you see."

"No offence, no offence at all," said Colonel Burridge heartily. "Very natural that you can't remember every one you meet, my boy. With you it is different; you are an object of interest everywhere. I heard you were in this neighborhood summering. Find it a little lonely, I guess, don't you?"

"Sometimes," answered Lester, thinking of the long hours with Victor under the oaks.

"Confounded lonely!" continued the Colonel emphatically. "My friend Danvers and I came down for a few days' hunting and fishing, but we've had enough of it already."

"Oh, I didn't know people could hunt in June," said Lester in surprise.

Mr. Danvers laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, despite the sharp white teeth it showed so plainly. "That depends on the game you

are after," he said. "We can't complain of our luck, eh, Burridge?"

And then Colonel Burridge laughed too. Only Victor stood apart gloomily, his hand shaking nervously as he baited his young master's hook.

"Try a bit of fish for bait, my man," said the Colonel. "You'll find it hides the hook. That's the great secret in fishing, hiding the hook. So there; now throw out your line here," and the speaker pushed Lester's chair a little nearer the water. "Ten to one, he has a bite within three minutes."

"Done!" said Danvers, taking out his watch. There was a breathless wait, and then came a twitch at Lester's line.

"Easy, easy," continued Colonel Burridge. "Don't get nervous, my boy; pull steady. George! it's a bouncer. Just two-thirty, Danvers; I've won."

Flushed with triumph, Lester landed his prize. Ah, this was sport indeed! Never had he met pleasanter company than these two gentlemen who kept near him, jesting, laughing, baiting his hooks, betting merrily on his luck, for an hour or more.

"It is time to go home," said Danvers at last. "We have fooled here long enough, Burridge. And you'd better not keep your young master here much longer, my man. The tide is coming in, and this beach will be under water in half an hour."

"Yes, yes, we must go too, monsieur, we must go," said Victor hurriedly.

"We may as well go together then," said Colonel Burridge pleasantly. "Let me push the chair a bit. I think we'll find this path to the left an easier climb. You ought to have a little goat-cart for these hills. I know a place in town where you can buy a nice strong billy-goat trained for harness, gentle and sure-footed as a donkey. With a neat little fix behind him you could drive yourself anywhere. Cost about a couple of hundred, but you wouldn't mind that."

"No," said Lester eagerly. "Where can I get it? I will ask mamma about it to-night."

"Or perhaps a dog would suit you better. I have a fine one here with me: St. Bernard, pure breed, golden brown with white breast; tall and strong as a young colt and gentle as a lamb. Took three prizes at the dog show,"

continued the Colonel, giving the chair another turn.

The path was growing wilder each moment. They had left the sunlit slopes where the wild roses and honeysuckle grew, and were among the pines now. The heavy branches arching overhead made a sad twilight of the summer noon, and the way was far from smooth, for twice Victor had to help Colonel Burridge to lift the chair over a ledge of rock. But Lester's companion chatted on so pleasantly that all this was unnoticed.

"Yes, Monk—I call him Monk after his old master—is a fine fellow, but he has outgrown my bachelor establishment and I would sell him cheap to a good owner that could appreciate him."

"I'd like to see him," said Lester with interest. "Mamma would buy him for me if I want him, I am sure. Could you bring him up to Playwater Farm?"

"Why, we're off to town this evening, and I am afraid I won't have time. But here is our place," continued the Colonel as a gloomy old house shrouded in heavy shrubbery became visible through the close-crowding pines. "If

you can stop a minute, I'll show him to you. You can have him for fifty dollars. He's worth a hundred if he is worth a cent, but I can't afford to keep him any longer. And if you'd like it, I'll leave him with you on trial; if he isn't what you want, I'll be up here again in a week and take him back."

"I'll stop," said Lester, quite delighted with so friendly an offer. "Victor, I want to stop here and look at this gentleman's dog."

"As monsieur pleases," stammered Victor, and the chair was turned in an old broken gateway, and up the weed-grown path that stretched between high box hedges to the house. Danvers stepped forward and unlocked the heavy front door.

"He is inside," said the Colonel, and he gave a quick push to the chair that sent it briskly forward, while the hall door slammed behind with a clang.

"Done!" shouted Danvers and Burridge uproariously.

"My money, my money, messieurs! Pay me now quick, that I may fly," cried Victor tremulously.

Lester gave a wild, startled glance around

him at the mouldy walls, the cobwebbed windows, the dust, the darkness, the desolation.

"Victor, take me out!" he cried sharply. "I don't like this place. Take me out, I say, quick, quick!"

"No use, my lad," said Burridge. "Your man has sold out to us. You are the game we've been hunting up here, and we've trapped you tight and fast. Oh, you can squeal all you please," as Lester's wild shrieks of terror rang out through the hall. "You will only be another shrieking devil added to the Pinecroft troop."

"Messieurs, messieurs, he is going into spasms!" cried Victor as the boy, half maddened by terror, flung himself from his chair, in a desperate effort to escape, and fell struggling and screaming to the floor.

"Bah!" said Danvers roughly. "Let him squirm; it won't hurt him. Lift him up, Burridge; we will have to shut him up in a safer place than this. Bring him to the room we have ready for him." And shrieking, struggling, battling with all his puny strength against his heartless captors, poor Lester was borne away.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE "EXCURSION."

GAY with fluttering flags and pennants, pulsing with stirring music, fifty boys cheering lustily from her decks, the big excursion boat "The Southern Belle" swept around the river curve to the old wharf at St. Bride's. In vain the officers in charge tried to guide their light infantry into rank and file; before the gang-plank was out there was a score of boys leaping to the shore.

Whoops and huzzas of delight woke the echoes of the cliffs as, in all the uproarious glee of their annual holiday, the altar-boys stormed the green heights of the old Mission. All kinds and ages and conditions were here, from the tall young cross-bearer, who led all solemn ceremonials with austere dignity, to the wee golden-haired "altar angels," who only knew how to walk with chubby hands clasped in the

"procession of the Lamb"; from handsome Captain Jack Waters and his dozen "Kostka" Cadets (Jack by his pastor's request officered the excursion) to sturdy Tim Lanahan, whose father drove Mrs. Senator Waters' coach. But, as Tim proudly assured his doting mother "whin the two of us are in our cassocks and surplices av a Sunday, ye'd niver know the differ but for the shine av Mr. Jack's boots."

So it was a very mixed but merry company that charged up to the gate of St. Bride's, scrambling, leaping, somersaulting in a very madness of glee, for to many of the young excursionists this yearly outing was the sole opening of gates closed at all other times on the Eden of Nature—sunlit river, waving forest, grassy hillside, sloping shore.

"Back, ye young omadhauns, back!" cried Brother Barry in excited warning as half a dozen or more started on a wild race to the cliffs that went down a sheer thirty feet to the river. "Ye'll break yer necks on the rocks below."

"He manes we are to kape off the grass," interpreted pale little Dennis Monaghan. "Aisy, b'ys, don't ye hear his riverince calling yez?

Kape off the grass as the cops bid ye at home."

"No, no," said Brother Barry pityingly. "Run where ye plaze, so ye don't kill yourselves intirely. Whisht, all of yez now; Father Felix wants to shpake to yez. Whisht, I say." But Brother Barry might as well have tried to hush the wild music of the mountain stream as it bursts from the winter's ice.

Father Felix stood under the old oak, his "marshals," as he called Ted and Dick and Dave, around him, and little Pat, her eyes round with wonderment, holding his hand, while the gentle sanctuary ladies in charge of the "little ones" vainly clapped their hands for silence.

It took military methods to subdue the glad tumult. The Captain of the Kostka Cadets leaped to a moss-grown stump. "Order!" he shouted in his most stentorian tone. "Right face! Shoulder arms! At-ten-tion!" Startled silence fell on the noisy crowd. "Father Felix wants to speak to us."

"Hush, ye spalpeens!" echoed Dennis Monaghan in less impressive vernacular, "his riverince is going to prache."

"Not at all, my dear children," said the old priest, smiling. "I would not preach to you this morning for—for a barrel of sugar-plums. I wish only to say three things, that will take about three minutes. First, to welcome you to old St. Bride's and wish you a glad, happy day in its green groves and gardens. Scatter and enjoy yourselves where and how you please; river, shore, lawn, woods, all are yours to-day. I only ask that when you hear the Mission bell give three strokes you will meet me here again under this old oak, when I will have something to propose that will interest you, I am sure. And thirdly, I will be glad if you will begin this beautiful day by singing a hymn of praise to the good God who has made this spot His dwelling-place for nearly three hundred years."

There was a moment's pause, and then a sweet-voiced sanctuary lady began the grand old hymn that has voiced the praise and joy of the Church for centuries—"Te Deum laudamus":

"Holy God, we praise Thy name;
Lord of all, we bow before Thee;
All on earth Thy sceptre claim,
All in heaven above adore Thee.
Infinite Thy vast domain,
Everlasting is Thy reign."

Voice after voice took up the hymn, until woods and cliffs seemed to thrill with the full, sweet young chorus, and the saucy blackbirds, twittering in the big oaks, hushed their own song to hear.

"Good, very good!" said Father Felix as the hymn ended. "We will sing again before we part to-day, my children. Now scatter and enjoy yourselves. Brother Barry, who is master of ceremonies, and these young people here, who have come to welcome you, will show you where to find amusement even in quiet old St. Bride's." And the young "marshals" were soon the centres of hilarious groups as the Mission guests scattered to various points of especial interest.

Ted headed the fun in the grove, where youngsters of his own age found the swings and the seesaws most to their taste.

Dick led the way to the target, where Captain Jack and his Kostka Cadets tried their marksmanship, while old Seth looked on with a grim smile. "Pretty fair, young mister, pretty fair for target shooting. But if that 'ar bull's-eye was a hungry catamount's with its teeth sharpened fur you, you'd have to hit

a leetle more pertikler, as you would only aggerawate his temper. Try it again, now. Steady your rifle, so."

"Eureka!" cried Captain Jack triumphantly, "went right to the spot that time."

Old Seth blinked at the target critically. "Waal, not quite," he said. "The h'ar-line counts consid'able when you mean business, young mister Ef you don't mind watching an old chap that has been handling a rifle for more'n fifty years, I'll show you a trick or two you might find useful in tighter places than this." And the old man proceeded to show them "tricks" of such skill that the young soldiers made the hills ring with their shouts of applause.

Dave, though a little pale from his night adventure, quite forgot its terrors in the sport that reigned on the river and shore, where the boys waded and swam, rowed and paddled under his teaching and guidance, for on the water Dave was master of the situation. The river had been Dave's friend from babyhood. The kindly waves had upborne his crippled limbs when they were powerless on land. He had learned to float and swim before he could

crawl. And what Dave could not do with a boat really was not worth the doing. Brother Barry knew his guests were safe with Dave in command of the sport on the river-shore.

And Pat, little Pat, spotless to-day in sunny muslin and flower-wreathed hat, her eyes dancing and curls flying, was a very fairy of fun to the chubby little altar angels, leading games of tag and hide-and-seek under the oaks, and over the lawn, and even through the wide-open hall of the old Mission house, that echoed strangely to-day with childish voices, and silvery laughter, and flying little feet.

Then the Angelus chimed from the old church steeple, and it was time for luncheon—and such a luncheon! The good pastors who were entertaining the lambs of their flock had determined there should be no stint to-day. There was a reckless lavishness that betrayed bachelor hosts unrestrained by parental experience. Sandwiches of every known kind, biscuits, crackers, cakes, unlimited lemon fizz and ginger pop by the crate, pies, pickles, candies, peanuts and pop-corn, and, to crown all, ice-cream—ice-cream white and pink and brown and green and yellow; ice-cream that must

have come by the barrel or hogshead, so exhaustless seemed the supply; ice-cream that Brother Barry, with every kindly wrinkle on his old face beaming with delight, ladled out as liberally as if it were corn-meal mush. "Pass up yer plates agin, childer; don't be afeerd; there's lashings of it. Here, ye poor little pale craythur there, have some more. Sure one plate of ice-cream is no more than a taste. Pink this time. Here it is, and good luck to ye, lad. Sick is it? " disclaimed Brother Barry to the gentle remonstrance of a sanctuary lady when her small charge six years old began on his third plate. "Niver a bit of harrum will it do, miss. Sure what is it but milk for babes anyhow? Let the craythurs have their fill for wanst."

And it was with a sure if not settled conviction that their "fill" had been reached that the young feasters heard the Mission bell calling them to the great oak to hear what new entertainment Father Felix had in store for them.

He stood awaiting them with a touch of gravity in his smile that hushed the noisy laughter and shouts of the more hilarious and drew the attention of all.

"I have something to propose, my children, that will crown this beautiful day with the blessing of a good, holy, and happy deed. Five miles from this spot, which has been consecrated to God's service since the Catholic founders landed on this river-shore, there stands the wreck of what was once a happy home. Fifty years ago little children like you played among its groves and gardens, birds sang joyfully in its trees, flowers bloomed about its wide porches; it was an earthly paradise where all was love and peace. But the shadow of sin fell upon the place—the sin that you are taught in your Catechism cries to Heaven for vengeance—wilful murder. I will not sadden your glad innocence by telling you the story, except to say that the horror that follows such a deadly crime fell upon the house, and has rested upon it ever since. Its owners left it to loneliness and desolation, no one could be found to buy, rent, or even live within the walls, that have stood during all these changing years the witnesses of sin and a terror to the ignorant and superstitious around them. Of late this terror has increased. Stories that to wiser ears sound wild and foolish are being

whispered about the neighborhood and, despite all the teachings of our holy Church, many of my poor simple colored people are returning to the forbidden customs of their race, and using charms, spells, and other fooleries to protect themselves from the evil spirits they fancy are haunting Pinecroft. This is wrong, as you all know, my dear children; and while we are not forbidden to believe that fallen spirits are sometimes permitted to show their diabolic malice on earth, such instances are rare and must be met by higher, holier powers than charms or spells. And so, since it is not fitting that these beautiful shores, consecrated to God by their first settlers, should have such a plague-spot of evil and darkness upon them, or that the curse of sin should rest as a terror and a blight in our midst, I propose that we go to-day, in our innocent gladness, to the old house, and by prayer and praise and the solemn blessing of the holy Church drive away the shadow of sin, and aught that may have followed that sin, forever. We will go in happy numbers, with song and music and sunshine to brighten our way, that so we may scatter the darkness of ignorance and super-

stition that has gathered about the place, and show that the children of God have no fear of its terrors. And since it is something of a walk, I further propose that we take boats and go by the shorter and pleasanter way of the river. Now who goes with me?"

The breathless silence was broken by a thundering chorus, and every boy's hand went up in enthusiastic acceptance of the invitation. Even six-year-old Robby Waters, who had fallen asleep on a sanctuary lady's lap, started up and, waving a small sticky hand, shouted, "I, I, father," with the rest.

There was just the touch of spice in this adventure the boys needed. Overfeasting might have made the afternoon hours a little dull, but the crowd was wide awake now to a boy. It is doubtful whether even Captain Jack Waters with the fighting blood of three generations in his veins, would have warmed up to Father Felix's invitation after dark. But with the glad sunlight shimmering through the boughs, the birds singing, the band playing, and fifty boys brimful of fun and ice-cream along, even a trip to Pinecroft was in the nature of a "lark."

It was decided that the ladies and the little ones should be left behind; but every boy over eight was soon scrambling gleefully down hill and cliff to the river, where Father Felix and Brother Barry stood to overlook this new "embarkation of the pilgrims," while Dave saw that each of the ten rowboats was steered by a boy who knew how to hold a rudder. As for the oars, they made little difference; the river current would take the little flotilla swiftly enough down stream.

One by one the boats started off, the band playing, the banners of the Sacred Heart and "Our Lady of Lourdes" floating on the breeze, the colors of the Kostka Cadets waving proudly beneath the silken Stars and Stripes they had won at the last competitive drill, the boys shouting and cheering lustily.

It was a gay scene and one that doubtless carried its cheerful lesson to the score or more of humble watchers on the Mission wharf whom good Brother Barry had called to receive the crumbs of the feast. Uncle Pete was there, and Aunt Nance led by her granddaughter, and Soph and Phœbe and a dozen others.

"Gwine ter Pinecroft," was the breathless

exclamation on every lip. "De scursion is gwine ter Pinecroft. Bress de Lord, some ob dem chillen will be gobbled up sure!"

"No, dey won't, chile, dey won't. Father Felix he gwine ter bless der groun' ez he goes along. No h'ant ull ever set he foot dare again."

"How many of dem chillen you say dey is?" asked old Nance sharply. "Fifty of 'em? Fifty chillen! Lord, Lord! no debbil kin stand agin dat. Dey'll scat away into der holes like skeert rats. Ef you wants to lay a ghost, dar ain't no quicker way dan to bring a baby into de house. I'se ole nuss enough to know dat. Dar wa'n't no libbing at Penrose Hall, for de h'ants, until young Marse Charlie was born. De ole Cunnel wouldn't res' in his grave no how, allus was cantankerous, and folks said he was up looking for de leg he left at Gettysburg; kep' cussing de Yankees to his las' breaf for taking it off. Lord, Lord! de way de ole Cunnel used to stump roun' dat house ob nights, shaking de fires and clinking de decanters, was awful. Ebbery one knowed he was in torment, and whar was de good ob coming back to tell 'em 'bout it? But de berry

night little marse was born he bu'st into de dining-room whar Uncle Ben was mixing toddy for de doctors, sent all de cut-glass tumblers a-smashing to de floor, and went up de chimney in a puff of smoke."

"Did Uncle Ben *see* him?" queried a breathless listener.

"See him?" echoed Aunt Nance severely. "What sort of fool question is dat, chile? Who spects to see a h'ant? No, but he heern him, chile, heern de door bu'st open and de wooden leg stump 'cross de floor, an' felt de cole wind dat comes wif a sperrit bresh by him, and he seen de glasses break and de smoke puff. An' dat was de las' ob de ole Cunnel at Penrose; he nebba troubled folks no more. Dat angel chile up in de cradle laid him tight and fas'. An' dat's what's gwine ter happen to-day. Yes, chillen, you can do all de blackberrying you want at Pinecroft arter dis."

But old Seth took another view of matters. "One minute, my lads," he said, stopping Captain Jack and three of his cadets as they were hurrying by the target where he stood reloading his rifles. "I've nothing to say against singing and praying, boys, but I've hed a notion

fur some time that thar's a good deal of solid flesh-and-bone rascality in them Pinecroft ghosts. I move that some of us *men*," and there was a twinkle in old Seth's deep-set eyes at the word, "make up a scouting expedition through the woods and strike Pinecroft by a back way I happen to know. And these here Winchesters we've been playing with to-day might come in handy. Suppose we take them along and see?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAPPERS TRAPPED.

WILD with fear and rage, every nerve in his frail pampered body thrilling with the horror and shock of his capture, Lester had been borne off by Burridge to another room, that had evidently been prepared for him. Strong wooden bars had been nailed across the one window, that was heavily screened by the ivy growth of half a century; a mouldy rug was upon the damp, filthy floor; there was a broken chair, and a moth-eaten couch upon which Burridge rudely flung the struggling, shrieking boy.

"Shut up, you young fool!" cried the Colonel, all his pleasant good-humor changed into surly ferocity. "Shut up or I will find a gag that will keep you quiet. We are not going to hurt you if you behave yourself; but"—with an oath—"if you keep up this racket I don't say

what we will do, for this is no kid-glove game we are playing just now. We've been planning this deal too long to be squeamish or soft-hearted, you can count on that. You have altogether too much money for a kid of your age, and we want a share of it; so we are going to hold you until your mother pays our price for you."

"She will, she will," cried Lester, grasping desperately at this straw of hope. "Oh, take me back to her and she will give you anything, anything!"

"That is what we are banking on," was the grim reply. "You are gilt-edged stock, as we know; but as for taking you back until you are paid for full price, cash down on our own terms, that's another story. So you may as well take it easy, young man, for here you are and here you stay until your mother pans out at our own figure."

"I won't stay, I won't!" shrieked Lester frantically. "Let me go; you shall not keep me in this awful place. I tell you it will kill me; it will kill me." And the young prince, whose simple whispered wish had hitherto been law to all around him, sprang up from his

mouldy couch and grasped Burridge's arm in fierce despair.

"Look here, now," said Burridge, shaking him roughly by the shoulder, "didn't I tell you you'd better keep quiet? Another yell like that and down you go in the cellar with the rats—ay, and worse than rats. Maybe you don't know where you are. Well, this old house is Pinecroft, and nobody has dared live here for fifty years, it's so chock-full of devils and ghosts. You might scream yourself black in the face and no one would come near you. We've been screaming ourselves for the last week or so, just to keep every one well frightened off. And neither Danvers nor myself are angels, young man, so you had better not try our tempers." And with this ominous bit of information Burridge flung the now almost speechless boy back on the couch, and turned from the room, slamming the door after him and slipping a heavy, creaking bolt into place with a sound that was to poor Lester the very crack of doom.

"Oh, mamma, mamma, mamma!" he wailed despairingly.

But alas! the tender, idolatrous love that

had shielded him from every rude breath and touch was powerless now. For the first time in all his thirteen years of life Lester called unheard. And oh! the strange horror of the scene around him: the damp floor, slimy with the mould of years; the mildewed walls, black with heavy cobwebs; the great wide chimney, yawning like an open tomb!

And this was Pinecroft, the Pinecroft of which the boys had told him, the Pinecroft of Uncle Pete's gruesome story—the lonely, dark old house that with its ghosts and devils was the terror of the river-shore. And he was left here alone, perhaps to die!

Lester started up among the ragged, musty cushions of his couch panting and trembling, a cold sweat of terror wetting his brow. Ah! the golden wand had indeed dropped from the hands of this fairy prince and left him only a wretched little crippled boy who knew not where to cry for help. For, though Lester had been taught to fold his hands and whisper a few words mechanically every morning and night, he had never learned to pray, to lift heart and voice to that Father in heaven who watches in love and tenderness over His children on

earth, and beg His blessing, His help, His care. "Mamma" had been all things to him. Mamma and the mighty millions that had bought him all earth could give until now.

And now—now, in the madness of his terror and despair, he could only sit up wide-eyed and panting, his hand clutching at his throat, where the sobs and cries he dared not utter seemed choking him, his blood running cold in his veins.

"Oh, I am dying, dying!" was his agonizing thought. "Mamma said I would die if I had a shock. I am dying here alone!"

And what might have happened to the frail, delicate, terror-stricken boy we cannot say, but that just then through the ivy-meshed window there came a sound that made every strained nerve in his body thrill and tingle as if he had received an electric shock.

Music! the full, joyous music of a band coming near, the brisk, merry rhythm of "Marching through Georgia" pulsing blithely through the horrors around him, the glad murmur of many voices breaking through the awful silence and loneliness of this living tomb.

Lester sprang to the window, forgetful of back and limbs and feet, feeling nothing in the

wild rush of hope that sent the blood coursing wildly through his chilled veins, while every nerve and muscle throbbed and thrilled with recovered life. "Help, help!" he cried, his feeble hands tearing at the heavy ivy that screened the window. "Help me!—here—here! I am shut in here." The glass had long since vanished, but the knotted stems of the ivy had twisted and interlaced themselves about the opening in a way that defied poor Lester's strength.

He could only cling to the barred window-frame, peer through the leaves, and cry out with the recklessness of mingled hope and despair, while the music grew louder, the murmur of voices nearer and nearer, and through the trembling leaves he could see what seemed a very army of children marching towards the house. And then suddenly the glad music of the band softened into a gentler strain, and two-score young voices burst into sweet, solemn song.

"Holy God, we praise Thy name
Lord of all, we bow before Thee;
All on earth Thy sceptre claim,
All in heaven above adore Thee.
Infinite Thy vast domain,
Everlasting is Thy reign."

"Help, help!" Vainly the young millionaire's feeble tones strove to break upon that full, beautiful harmony. Louder and sweeter swelled the hymn, while the fair ranks of youth and innocence came on through the shadows of pines and box hedge, up the weed-grown paths, their voices making echoes unheard for years in this sin-blighted spot.

> "Hark! the loud celestial hymn
> Angel choirs above are raising,
> Cherubim and seraphim
> In unceasing chorus praising.
> Fill the heavens with sweet accord,
> Holy, holy, holy Lord."

"Help, help!" cried the desperate boy again from his ivy-veiled prison "Oh, they will pass and not hear me!" And as if the solemn appeal of the sweet singers without thrilled some waking chord in his soul, Lester fell on his knees and for the first time in his young life prayed indeed.

"O God, my Father in heaven, help me, save me! Do not let them pass me by and leave me in this awful place! Help, help! oh, help!"

A wild rush of heavy footsteps sounded with-

out, and Burridge, pale with fear and fury, burst into the room.

"Hush!" he cried, clapping his heavy hand on Lester's mouth. "Another cry and I choke the life out of you. Down into the cellar you go until this here fool show passes by."

"Ah! would you, eh?" thundered a stentorian voice at the open door behind them, and in a moment the "Colonel" went sprawling to the floor under a mighty blow from old Seth's knotty fist, while Captain Jack and his comrade "presented arms" with unpleasant aim at the prostrate rascal's head. "No use in showing fight, mister; the boys have the drop on you. We caught your two mates as they were bolting out the back way, not knowing that this 'light infantry' had a rear-guard. Steady, boys; keep him covered with those shooting-irons while I tie him up."

And Lester! All things had swayed and blackened before him when the cruel hands of Burridge had caught his throat. He knew nothing more until he found himself spluttering and choking over a fiery draught from old Seth's hunting-flask. He was out on the porch

in the blessed sunshine, Father Felix holding his head, while Dick and Ted and Dave and thousands of other boys, so it seemed to his dazed eyes, were buzzing wildly around him.

"Is he dead?" "No, no, he is coming to." "Who is he?" "What did they steal him for?" "The Kostka Cadets caught them all." "Here's the thing they played devil with," and a huge, horned false face was tumbled out by a young explorer from its hiding-place in the hall. *Toot, toot, toot!* came the wailing notes of an old trombone, discovered by another. "Hear the ghosts crying, boys. *Toot, toot, toot!*" And the moan of Uncle Pete's "lost sperrit" was lost in a chorus of boyish shouts and laughter.

"Am I safe? am I safe?" cried Lester tremulously, bewildered by the bright, glad scene on which he had opened his eyes that had closed on such horror and despair.

"Quite safe, my son," said Father Felix soothingly. "There is nothing to make you tremble. Bring another cushion, Dick, and let the poor child rest here in the sunshine. You and Ted stay with him while I bless the house. Come, my children, you have all seen that the

ghosts and devils of Pinecroft were but the tricks of evil men. God sent us here in time to avert a cruel wrong. Fling open the doors and windows and let in the sunshine, while with the prayers and blessing of our holy Church we banish the shadow of sin, the power of darkness, from Pinecroft forever."

And so, except for the three villains, to whom was meted out just punishment of their crime, the Playwater Plot ended in gladness and sunshine, and blessing to all concerned; for, instead of dying from the terrible shock he had received, Lester began to get well from that hour. How and why it happened no one was wise enough to say, though Brother Barry had a theory of his own that the blessing of saintly martyred hands had cured the boy—for cured he was before the oaks on Playwater Farm had turned from green into gold, or the chestnuts rattled down on old Sweet as he foamed merrily as ever down the hill.

Many and various were the learned explanations of this prodigy. Scientific pamphlets were written in French, English, and German, and medical societies discussed the young

millionaire's cure, in solemn session, while good Doctor Deane found himself suddenly famous. In vain the honest old doctor disclaimed the unlooked-for honors thrust upon him, declaring his only treatment had been hot baths and sugar powders; his fortune as a specialist was made.

In truth Mrs. Leonard, in the first fervor of her gratitude at Lester's escape, had given the good old doctor and Mother Nature their way. All the luxurious paraphernalia that had surrounded Lester were discarded, all that could recall Victor and the past banished.

With sturdy old Seth as guardian, Dick, Ted, and Dave as companions, Lester roamed the hills and forests and river, at first indeed astride his Shetland pony or seated in his pretty boat, but later on feet that, bared to the sun and breeze and stream, soon grew strong and light and active as Dick's own. In her rapture at her darling's restored health Mrs. Leonard bought one fourth of Playwater Farm, at a price which made Aunt Beth and Leigh independent of boarders forever. And on the terraced hill down which old Sweet tumbled still in riotous welcome the young million-

aire has his "home." Stately mansions in town and by seashore are his, but it is to the quaint, simple cottage by the Playing Waters he comes to spend the gladdest months of all the year. Here old Seth is installed in comfortable quarters as caretaker and guardian, and lame Dave has a boat-house by the river bank, where he rules supreme over launch and canoe.

And here at Christmas there are such house-parties as keep old Bunner "buzzing" for the remainder of the year.

"I was there, ma'am; yes, I was there," he retails to Mrs. Reed as he fills the molasses-jug. "I had to take up a whole wagon-load of stuff Mrs. Leonard ordered. Turkeys — I bought them all round the country—and geese the fattest I could find, to say nothing of chickens and eggs and garden-truck. Brings a pretty tidy sum to my pocket, I tell you. But I'd give it all up, ma'am, to see the show within. Prettiest Christmas picture you ever looked at. House all dressed in ivy and holly-berries; big fires blazing in all the chimneys; lamps every color of the rainbow, shining everywhere. And the girls and the boys—Lord, Lord, what

a time they was having, to be sure! Master Lester himself, straight as an arrow now in his soldier clothes—he goes to some military school so as to keep braced up; and young Dick Wade home from college—he is studying to be a doctor, and Miss Beth and Miss Leigh they do say are so set up about him they can't talk of nothing else; and Ted—I must say that curly-haired boy is my favorite of all. As for the girls—wal, they were all pretty enough, but Lord, Lord! little Pat Jessup took the cake, she did indeed, ma'am. When she stood up with Dick Wade to dance, in her pretty white frock, with her cheeks like roses and her eyes like stars, there wasn't a girl from city or country that could come near her. Yes, it was as pretty a sight as I ever seen, ma'am; even Brother Barry agreed to that. He and Father Felix stopped for a minute as they were going by in the sleigh to give the boys a welcome home, he said. You know the Leonards are Catholics now; turned right after the boy was cured. And old Seth Burns, he is a regular professing member too. There's something about Father Felix that sort of draws everybody. I tell you, ma'am, when Mrs. Leonard

asked him to give the young folks his Christmas blessing, and that good old man stood there in the ivy-wreathed doorway and lifted up his hands, though I'm a Baptist straight through for three generations I went down on my knees with old Seth and the rest. Couldn't help it, ma'am; and whatever you may say, I felt better for it. For blessings are sure to work somehow for good, as we all learned four years ago when Father Felix took them children to Pinecroft and broke up the Playwater Plot."

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